ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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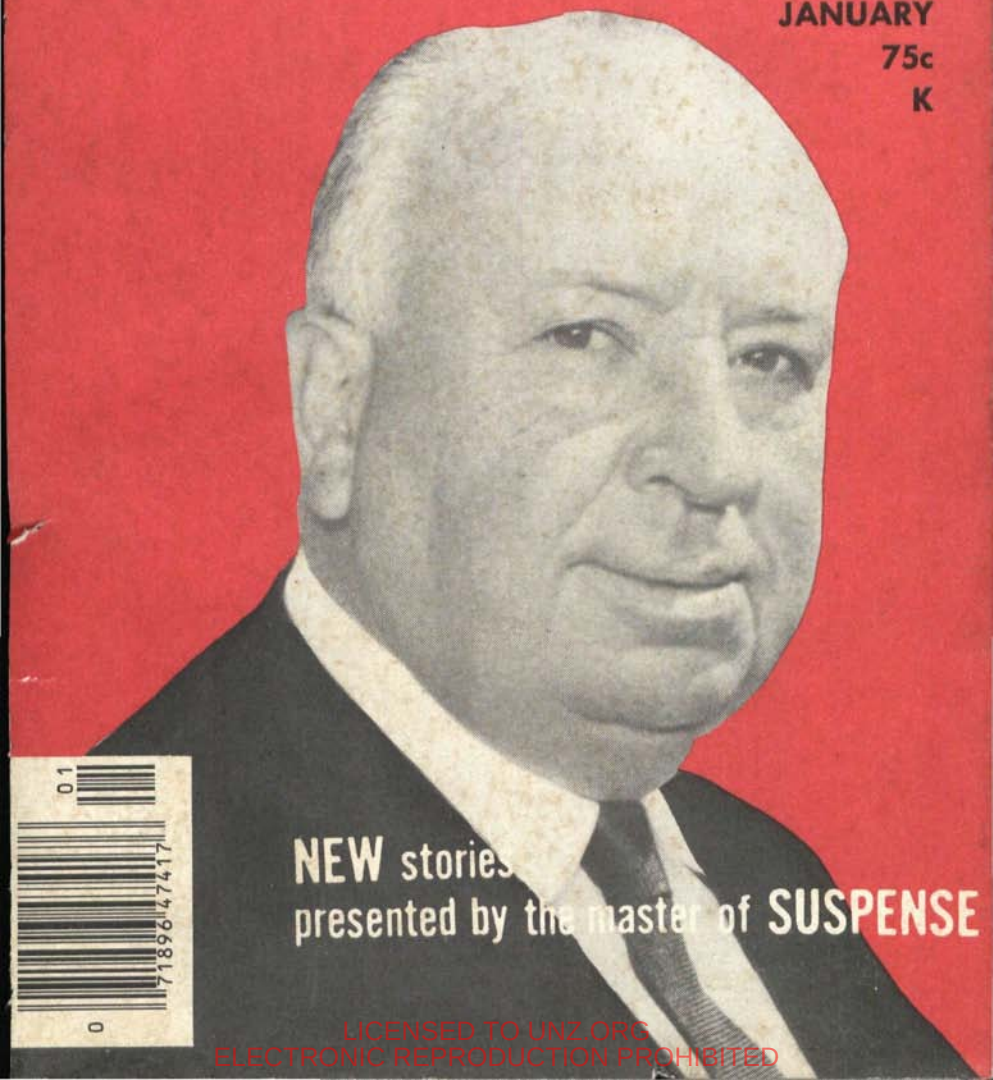

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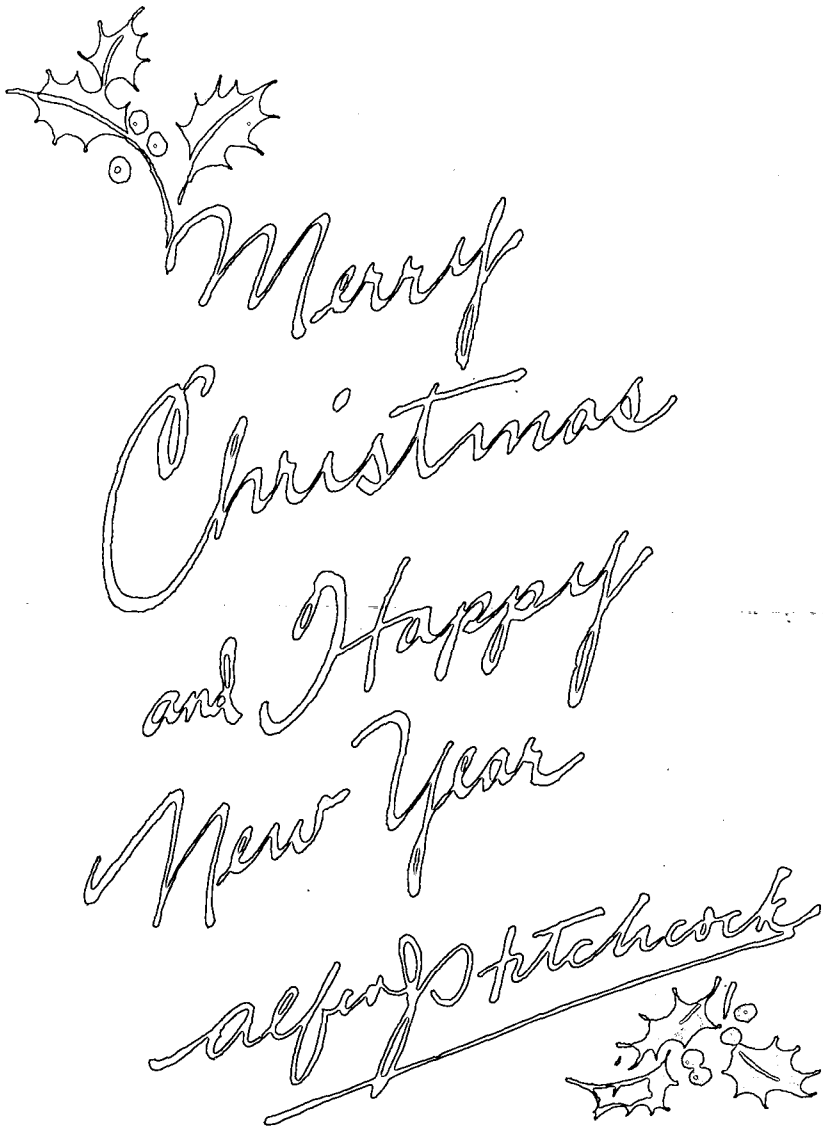

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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Lest the reader become disillusioned, let him be assured that the obvious is not always veritable.

The three of us—Ardis, Cedric Clute and I—were sitting at a quiet corner table, halfway between the Magic Cellar's bar and stage, when the contingent of uniformed policemen made their entrance. There were about thirty of them, all dressed in neatly-pressed uniforms and gleaming accessories, and they came down the near aisle two abreast like a platoon of marching soldiers. Most of the tables that front the stage were already occupied, so the cops took over the stack of carpet-covered trunks which comprise a kind of bleacher section directly behind the tables.

I cocked an eyebrow. "Most saloon owners would object to such an influx of fuzz," I said to Cedric. He owns the Cellar, San Francisco's only nightclub devoted solely to the sadly vanishing art of magic.

"Policemen have a right to be entertained," he said, smiling. "Their lot, I understand, is not a happy one."

Ardis said speculatively, "They look very young."

"That's because they're most of the graduating class of the Police Academy," Cedric told her. "Their graduation ceremony was this afternoon, and I invited them down as a group. Actually, it was Captain Dickensheet's idea." He indicated a tall, angular, graying man, also in uniform, who was about to appropriate a table for himself and two other elder offi-

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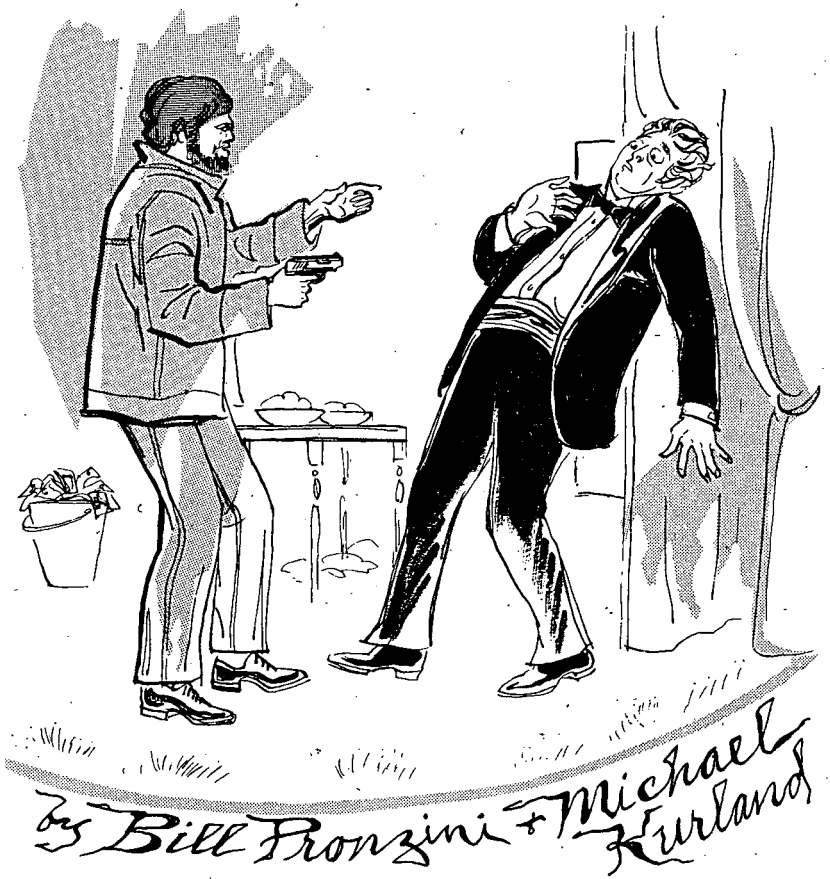
cers. "I've known him casually for a couple of years, and he thought his men would enjoy the show."

"With Christopher Steele and The Amazing Boltan on the same bill," Ardis said, "they can't help but enjoy it."

I started to add an agreement to that—and there was Steele himself standing over the table, having appeared with that finely developed knack he has of seeming to come from nowhere.

Christopher Steele is the Cellar's main attraction and one of the greatest of the modern illusionists. I don't say that because I happen to be his manager and publicist. He's also something of a secretive type, given to quirks like



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an inordinate fascination for puzzles and challenges, the more bizarre the better. Working for and with him the past five years has been anything but dull.

Steele usually dresses in black, both on stage and off, and I think he does it because he knows it gives him, with his thick black hair and dark skin and eyes, a vaguely sinister air. He looked sinister now as he said, "The most amazing thing about Phil Boltan, you know, is that he's still alive. He does a fine job on stage, but he has the personal habits and morals of a Yahoo."

Ardis' eyes shone as they always did when Steele was around; she's his assistant and confidante and lives in a wing of his house across the Bay, although if there is anything of a more intimate nature to their relationship neither of them has ever hinted at it to me. She said, "You sound as though Boltan is hardly one of your favorite people, Christopher."

"He isn't—not in the least."

Cedric frowned. "If you'd told me you felt that way, I wouldn't have booked you both for the same night."

"It doesn't matter. As I said, he *is* a fine performer."

"Just what is it that you find so objectionable about Boltan?" I asked as Steele sat down.

"He's a ruthless egomaniac," Steele said. "Those in the psychological professions would call him a sociopath. If you stand in his way, he'll walk over you without hesitation."

"A fairly common trait among performers," I said blandly.

"Not in Boltan's case. Back in the '40's, for example, he worked with a man named Granger—"

"The Four-Men-in-a-Trunk Illusion?" Ardis said immediately.

"Right. The Granger Four-Men-in-a-Trunk Illusion premiered at the Palladium before George the Fifth. That was before Boltan's time, of course. At any rate, Granger was getting old, but he had a beautiful young wife named Cecily and an infant son; he also had Phil Boltan as an assistant.

"So one morning Granger awoke to find that Boltan had run off with Cecily and several trunks of his effects. He was left with the infant son and a load of bitterness he wasn't able to handle. As a result, he put his head in a plastic bag one evening and suffocated himself. Tragic—very tragic."

"What happened to the son?" Cedric asked.

"I don't know. Granger had no close relatives, so I imagine the boy went to a foster home."

Ardis asked, "Did Boltan marry Cecily?"

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"No. Of course not. He's never married any of his conquests."

"Nice guy," I said.

Steele nodded and leaned back in his chair. "Enough about Phil Boltan," he said. "Matthew, did you have any problem setting up for my show?"

"No," I told him. "All your properties are ready in the wings."

"Sound equipment?"

"In place."

"Ultraviolet bulbs?"

"Check," I said. The u.v. bulbs were to illuminate the special paint on the gauze and balloons and other "spook" effects for Steele's midnight seance show. "It's a good thing I did a pre-check; one of the Carter posters fluoresced blue around the border, and I had to take it down. Otherwise it would have been a conspicuous distraction."

Cedric looked at me reproachfully. "I suppose you'd have removed the Iron Maiden if that had fluoresced," he said, meaning the half-ton iron torture box in one corner.

"Sure," I said. "Dedication is dedication."

We made small talk for a time, and then Cedric excused himself to take his usual place behind the bar; it was twenty past ten. I sipped my drink and looked idly around the Cellar. It was stuffed with the paraphernalia and memorabilia of Carter the Great, a world-famous illusionist in the '20's and '30's. His gaudy posters covered the walls.

The stage was rather small, but of professional quality; it even had a trapdoor, which led to a small tunnel, which in turn came up in the coatroom adjacent to the bar. The only other exits from the stage, aside from the proscenium, were curtains on the right and left sides, leading to small dressing rooms. Both rooms had curtained second exits to the house, on the right beyond the Davenport Brothers Spirit Cabinet—a privy-sized cubicle in which a tarot reader now did her thing—and on the left behind a half-moon table used for close-up card tricks.

At 10:30 the voice of Cedric's wife Jan came over the loudspeaker, announcing the beginning of Boltan's act. The lights dimmed, and the conversational roar died to a murmur. Steele swiveled his chair to face the stage, the glass of brandy he had ordered in one hand. He cupped the glass like a fragile relic, staring over its lip at the stage as the curtain went up.

"Oh, for a muse of fire . . ." he said softly, when The Amazing Boltan made his entrance.

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"What was that?" I whispered, but Steele merely gave me one of his amused looks and waved me to silence.

The Amazing Boltan was an impressive man. Something over six feet tall and ever so slightly portly, he had the impeccable grooming and manners of what would have been described fifty years ago as a "born gentleman." His tuxedo didn't seem like a stage costume, but like a part of his personality. It went with the gold cuff links and cigar case, and the carefully tonsured, white-striped black hair. He looked elegant, but to my eyes it was the elegance of a con man or a headwaiter.

Boltan's act was showy, designed to impress you constantly with his power and control. He put a rabbit into a box, then waved his hands and collapsed the box, and the rabbit was gone. He took two empty bowls and produced rice from them until it overran the little table he was working on and spilled in heaps onto the stage floor. He did a beautiful version of an effect called the Miser's Dream. Gold coins were plucked out of the air and thrown into a bucket until it rattled with them; then he switched to paper money and filled the rest of the bucket with fives and tens. All the while he kept up a steady flow of patter about "The Gold of the Genies" and "The Transmutations of the Ancients of Lhassa."

When he was finished with this effect, Boltan said to the audience, "I shall now require an assistant. A young lady, perhaps. What about you, miss? That's it—don't be afraid. Step right up here on stage with me." He helped a young, winsome-looking blonde girl across the footlights, and proceeded to amaze her and the rest of the audience by causing sponge balls to multiply in her closed hand and appear and disappear from his.

He excused the girl finally and asked for another volunteer: "A young man, perhaps, this time." I could tell by the pacing of the act that he was headed toward some impressive finale.

A bulky bearded man who had just pushed himself to a table at the front, and was therefore still standing, allowed himself to be talked into climbing onto the stage. He was dressed somewhere between college casual and sloppy: a denim jacket, jeans, and glossy black shoes. He appeared to be in his late twenties, though it wasn't easy to tell through his medium-length facial hair.

"Thank you for coming up to help me," Boltan said in his deep

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stage voice. "Don't be nervous. Now, if you'll just hold your two hands outstretched in front of you, palms up. . ."

The bearded man, instead of complying with this request, took a sudden step backward and pulled a small automatic from his jacket pocket.

The audience leaned forward expectantly, thinking that this was part of the act; but Steele, who apparently felt that it wasn't, jumped to his feet and started toward the stage. I pushed my own chair back, frowning, and went after him.

Boltan retreated a couple of steps, a look of bewilderment crossing his elegant features. The bearded man leveled the gun at him, and I heard him say distinctly, "I'm going to kill you, Boltan, just as someone should have done years ago."

Steele shouted something, but his words were lost in the deafening explosion of three shots.

Boltan, staggering, put a hand to his chest. Blood welled through his fingers, and he slowly crumpled. A woman screamed. The uniformed police cadets and their officers were on their feet, some of them starting for the stage. Steele had reached the first row of tables, and was trying to push between two chairs to get to the stage. The bearded man dropped his weapon and ran offstage right, disappearing behind the curtain leading to the dressing room on that side.

The entire audience knew now that the shooting wasn't part of the show; another woman screamed, and people began milling about, several of them rushing in panic toward the Cellar's two street exits. Blue uniforms converged on the stage, shoving tables and civilians out of the way, leaping up onto it. Steele had made it up the steps by this time, with me at his heels, but his path toward the stage right curtain was hampered by the cadets. Over the bedlam I heard a voice shout authoritatively, "Everyone remain calm and stay where you are! Don't try to leave these premises!"

Another voice, just as authoritative, yelled, "Jordan, Bently, Cullen—cover the exits! Let no one out of here!"

I could see the stage area exit beyond the Spirit Cabinet, the one from the dressing room area stage right to the club floor; in fact, I had kept my eyes on it from the moment the bearded man had run off, because that was the only other way out of that dressing room—but no one appeared there. Steele and the cops pushed their

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way through the stage right curtain just as several other cadets reached the exit I was watching. Any second now they would drag the bearded man out, I thought, and we could start to make sense out of what had just happened.

Only they didn't emerge, and I heard shouts of surprise and confusion instead.

"He's got to be in here somewhere."

"He's not here, damn it, you can see that."

"Another exit . . ."

"There isn't any other exit," Steele's voice said.

"Well, he's hiding in here somewhere."

"Where? There's no place for a man to hide."

"Those costume trunks—"

"They're too small to hold a man, as you can plainly see."

"Then where the hell is he? He can't have vanished into thin air!"

Subsequently, it appeared that the man who had shot The Amazing Boltan in full view of more than thirty cops had done just exactly that.

Half an hour later I was again sitting at the corner table, along with Steele, Ardis, a harassed-looking Cedric, and Ced's slender and attractive wife Jan. The contingent of police had managed to quiet the frightened patrons, who were now all sitting at the tables or in the grandstand, or clustered along the walls, or bellied up to the bar for liquid fortification; they looked nervous and were mostly silent. Blue uniforms and business suits—the cadets and their officers, and several regular patrolmen and Homicide people—stood guard or moved about the room examining things and asking questions and doing whatever else it is cops do at the scene of a violent crime.

A number of things had occurred in that half hour.

Item: Boltan had died of the gunshot wounds, probably instantaneously.

Item: The gun which the murderer had dropped, a Smith & Wesson M39, had been turned over to the forensic lab men. If they had found any fingerprints on it, we hadn't heard of it yet.

Item: The police cadets who had covered the Cellar's two street exits immediately after the shooting swore that no one had left.

Item: The entire stage area and the remainder of the club had been thoroughly searched without turning up any sign of the bearded killer.

Conclusions: The Amazing Boltan had been shot to death by a man who could not have left

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the Magic Cellar, was therefore still here, and yet, seemingly, was not here at all.

All of us were baffled, as we had said to each other several times in the past few minutes. Or, rather, Ardis and Cedric and Jan and I had said so; Steele sat in silence, which was unusual for him, and seemed to be brooding. When I asked him how he thought it had been done, since after all he was a master illusionist and a positive fanatic when it came to "impossible challenges," he merely gave me a meditative look and deigned comment.

We had considered, of course, the trapdoor in the stage, and had instantly ruled it out. For one thing, it was located in the middle of the stage itself—right behind where Boltan had fallen, as a matter of fact—and all of us had seen the killer exit stage right through the side curtain; there was no trap in that dressing room area. The tunnel leading from under the stage trap to the coatroom had been searched anyway, but had been empty.

I dredged my memory for possible illusions which would explain the bearded man's vanishing act, but they all seemed to demand a piece of apparatus or specific condition which just wasn't present. Houdini once vanished an elephant off the stage of the Hippodrome, but he had a large, specially made cage to do it. What did seem clear was that the murderer knew, and had applied, the principles of stage magic to come up with a brilliant new effect, and then had used it to commit a cold-blooded homicide on the stage of the Magic Cellar.

Captain Dickensheet approached our table and leaned across it, his palms hard on the edge. "Everybody," he said pointedly to Cedric, "has to be somewhere. Don't you have *any* ideas where the killer got to—and how?"

Cedric shook his head wearily. "There's just no other way out of that dressing room besides the curtain onto the stage and the curtain next to the Spirit Cabinet," he said. "The Cabinet is solid down to the floor, and the other walls are brick."

"No gimmick or gizmo to open that Cabinet's back wall?"

"No, none."

"Even if there were," Steele said, "it would merely propel the killer into the audience. The fact is, Captain, he could not have gotten out of the dressing room unseen. You have my professional word on that."

Dickensheet straightened up, glaring. "Are you telling me, then,

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that what we all saw couldn't have happened?"

"Not at all." Steele stood abruptly and squeezed past my chair to the aisle. "I can assure you that what you saw is exactly what happened. Exactly." Then, nodding to the table, he headed back to the stage left dressing room.

Dickensheet lowered his lanky frame into the aisle chair and stared across at the Carter the Great poster on the wall facing him. It depicted Carter astride a camel, surrounded by devils and imps, on his way to "steal" the secrets of the Sphinx and the marvels of the tomb of old King Tut. "Magicians!" the captain said, with feeling.

Cedric asked, "How much longer will you be holding everyone here?"

"I don't know just yet."

"Well, can't you just take all their names and addresses, and let them go home?"

"That's not up to me," Dickensheet said sourly. "You'll have to talk to Lupoff, the homicide inspector in charge of the investigation."

"All right." Cedric sighed, and got up to do that.

I decided to leave the table too, because I was wondering what Steele was up to backstage. I excused myself and went into the left dressing room where I found Steele sitting in front of the mirror, carefully applying his stage makeup.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"It's twenty till twelve, Matthew," he said. "I'm on at midnight."

"You don't think they're going to let you do your show *now*, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Well, they just took Boltan's body off the stage fifteen minutes ago."

"Ah yes," Steele said. "Life and death, the eternal mysteries. My audience is still here, I note, and I'm sure they'd like to be entertained. Not that watching the police poking and prying into all the corners big enough to conceal a man isn't entertaining."

"I don't understand why you'd even *want* to go on tonight," I said. "There's no way you can top the last performance. Besides, a spook show would hardly be in good taste right now."

"On the contrary, it would be in perfect taste. Because during the course of it, I intend to reveal the identity of the murderer of Philip Boltan."

"What!" I stared at him. "Do you mean you know how the

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whole thing was actually done?"

"I do."

"Well—how? How did the killer disappear?"

"The midnight show, Matthew," he said firmly.

I looked at him with sufferance, and then nodded. Steele never does anything the easy way. As well, here was an opportunity to put on a kind of show of shows, and Steele is first and foremost a showman. Not that I objected to this, you understand. My business is publicity and public relations, and Steele's flair for drama is the best kind of both. If he named the killer during his midnight show, and brought about the capture of the bearded man, the publicity would be fantastic.

"All right," I said, "I'll use my wiles to convince the cops to allow you to go ahead. But I hope you know what you're doing."

"I always know what I'm doing."

"Ninety percent of the time, anyway."

"Ask Ardis to come in here," Steele said. "I'll have to tell her what effects we're doing now, and in what order."

"You wouldn't want to give me some idea of what's going on, would you?"

Steele smiled a gentle, enigmatic smile. "It is now quarter to twelve, Matthew. I would like the show to begin at exactly midnight."

Which meant that he had said all he intended to say for the time being, and I was therefore dismissed. So I went back out into the club where Captain Dickensheet was still sitting at our table with Jan and Ardis; Cedric had also returned, and had brought with him the dark, intense-looking inspector-in-charge, Lupoff.

When I got to the table I told Ardis that Steele wanted to see her. Immediately, she hurried to the stage left dressing room. I sat down and put on my best PR smile for Lupoff and Dickensheet.

"I have a request from Christopher Steele," I said formally. "He wants to be allowed to do his midnight show."

Both cops frowned, and Lupoff said, "I'm in no mood for levity."

"Neither is Steele. He wants to do the show, he says, in order to name the murderer and explain how the vanishing act was done."

Everyone at the table stared at me, Cedric and Jan looking relieved. Lupoff and Dickensheet, on the other hand, looked angrily disbelieving. The inspector said, "If Steele knows how and who, why the hell doesn't he just come out here and say so?"

"You have to understand him,"

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I said easily. "He's an artist, a showman. He thinks only in theatrical terms." I went on to tell them about Steele's idiosyncracies, making it sound as though he were a genius who had to be treated with kid gloves—which was true enough. "Besides, if he solves the case for you, what can it hurt to let him unmask the killer in his own way?"

"The murderer *is* still here, then?" Cedric asked.

"I think so," I said. "Steele didn't really tell me much of anything, but that's what I would assume." I returned my gaze to the two cops. "You've got the Cellar sealed off, right? The killer can't possibly escape."

"I don't like it," Lupoff said. "It's not the way things are done."

I had to sell them quickly; it was nearing midnight. I decided to temporize. "Steele needs the show in order to expose the guilty man," I said. "He's not sure of the killer's identity, but something he has planned in the show will pin it down."

"How does he know it will work?" Dickensheet asked. Then he scowled. "He wouldn't be wanting to do this show of his just for publicity, would he?"

"Listen, Captain," I said, "the publicity won't be very good if he blows it. I'd say Steele's pretty sure of himself."

Cedric nodded eagerly; he knew, as I did, that if Steele came through as usual, it would turn a possibly harmful blow to the Cellar's image into a potential drawing card. He said, "I've known Christopher Steele for a long time, and I'll vouch for what Mr. Booth says. If Steele claims to know what happened here tonight, then he does know. I think you ought to go along with him."

Lupoff and Dickensheet held a whispered conference. Then they both got up, told us to wait, and went backstage, no doubt to confront Steele. Three minutes later they came out again, still looking dubious—but knowing Steele as I did, I could tell even before Dickensheet confirmed it that they had given him the go-ahead.

Midnight; and the civilian audience had been fidgeting in their seats for a couple of minutes, since Cedric had announced to them over the loudspeaker that Steele was going to do his midnight show. The contingent of police were also fidgeting, owing to the fact that none of them had any idea, either, of what was about to happen. I was alone at the table, Jan having gone back to

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the bar and Cedric off to work the light board.

The house lights dimmed, and the curtain rolled up. Steele stood motionless at center stage, the rose-gelled spots bathing him in soft light; his work clothes, a black suit over a dark turtleneck, gave him a sinister-somber look. He bowed slightly and said, "Good evening."

The last murmur died away among the audience, and two hundred people silently watched for whatever miracle Christopher Steele, Master of Illusion, was about to perform.

"We have, all of us," he said, "just witnessed a murder, and a murder is a horrible thing. It is the one irremediable act, terrible in its finality and inexcusable in any sane society. No matter how foul the deeds or repugnant the actions of another human being, no one has the right to take from him that which cannot be given back: his life.

"But the murder itself has been overshadowed by the miraculous disappearance of the killer, seemingly before our very eyes. He ran into that dressing room—" Steele gestured to his left, "—which has only two exits, and apparently never came out. The room has been thoroughly searched, and no human being could possibly remain concealed therein. A vanishing act worthy of a Houdini."

Steele's eyes peered keenly around at the audience. "I am something of an authority on vanishing—"

Suddenly the lights went out.

There was an immediate reaction from the audience, already edgy from the past hour-and-a-half's happenings; no screams, but a nervous titter in the dark and the sound of chairs being pushed back and people standing.

Then the lights came back on, and Steele was still there, center stage, facing the audience. "Accept my apologies," he said. "Please, all of you be seated. As you can see—" he indicated the two police officers standing one on each side of the stage, "—there is nowhere I could go. As well, the lights were off then for a full five seconds, which is much too long for an effective disappearance. A mere flicker of darkness, or a sudden burst of flame, is all that is needed.

"I shall now attempt to solve this mystery, which has so completely baffled my friends on the police and the rest of us. I'm sure you will forgive me if, in so doing, I create a small mystery of my own."

Steele clapped his hands together three times, and on the

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third clap there was a blinding flash of light—and the stage lights went out again—and came back on almost instantly.

Steele was gone.

In his place stood the beautiful Ardis, in her long white stage gown, her arms outstretched and a smile on her lips. "Hello," she said.

The audience gasped. The thing was done so neatly, and so quickly; Steele had turned into Ardis before their eyes. Someone tentatively applauded, as much in a release of tension as anything else, but there was no doubt that the audience was impressed.

Ardis held up her hands for silence. "What you have just seen is called a transference," she said when the room grew still again. "Christopher Steele is gone, and I am here. And now I, too, in my turn, shall leave. I shall go into the fourth dimension, and you shall all observe the manner of my going. Yet none of you will know where I have gone. Thus—farewell."

There was another bright flash, and the lights once more went out; but we could still see Ardis before us as a kind of ghostly radiance, her white dress almost glowing in the dark. Then she dwindled before our eyes, as though receding to a great distance. Finally, the lights came on to stay, and the stage was empty, and she was gone.

There was a shocked silence, as though the audience was collectively holding its breath. In that silence, suddenly, a deep, imperious voice said, "I am here!"

Everybody turned in their seats, including me, for the voice had come from the rear of the room.

Incredibly, there stood the murderer—beard, denim jacket, and all.

Several of the policemen started toward him, and one woman shrieked. At the same time, the bearded man extended his arm and pointed a long finger. "I," he said, "am you."

He was pointing at one of the young police cadets standing near the Iron Maiden.

The cadet backed away, startled, looking trapped. Immediately, the bearded man hunched in on himself and pulled the denim jacket over his head. When he stood up again, he was Steele—and the apparition that had been the murderer was a small bundle of clothing in his hand. Even the jeans had been replaced by Steele's black suit trousers.

"You are the murderer of Philip Boltan," Steele said to the cadet. "You—"

The cadet didn't wait for any

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more; he turned and made a wild run for the nearest exit. He didn't make it, but it took three other cops a full minute to subdue him.

Some time later, Steele, Ardis, Cedric, Jan, and I were sitting around the half-moon table waiting for Inspector Lupoff and Captain Dickensheet to return from questioning the murderer of Philip Boltan. The Cellar had been cleared of patrons and police, and we were alone in the large, dark room.

Steele occupied the seat of honor: an old wooden rocking chair in the dealer's spot in the center of the half-moon. He had said little since the finale of his special midnight show. All of us had wanted to ask him how he knew the identity of the killer, and exactly how the vanishing act had been worked, but we knew him well enough to realize that he wouldn't say anything until he had the proper audience. He just sat there smiling in his enigmatic way.

When the two officers finally came back, they looked disgruntled and morose. They sat down in the two empty chairs, and Dickensheet said grimly, "Well, we've just had an unpleasant talk with Spellman—or the man I knew as Spellman, anyway. He's made a full confession."

"The man you knew as Spellman?" I said.

"His real name is Granger. Robert Granger."

Cedric frowned, looking at Steele. "Isn't that the name of Boltan's former partner, the one you told us committed suicide?"

"It is," Steele told him. "I had an idea that might be who the young cadet was."

"You mean he killed Boltan because of what happened to his father?" I asked.

"Yes," Lupoff said. "He decided years ago that the perfect revenge was to kill Boltan on stage, in full view of an audience, and then disappear. He's been planning it ever since, mainly by studying and mastering the principles of magic."

"Then he intended from the beginning to murder Boltan in circumstances such as those tonight?"

"More or less," Dickensheet said. "He wanted to do the job during one of Boltan's regular performances, and the invitation to the Academy graduating class tonight convinced him that now was the time. It was only fitting, according to Granger, that Boltan die on stage under an aura of mystery."

Jan said bewilderedly, "But why would a potential murderer join

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the *police* force? It's incredible!"

"Spellman, or Granger, is mentally unstable. We try to weed them out, but every once in a while one slips by. He believes in meting out punishment to those who would 'do evil,' in his words just now. God only knows what he might have done if he'd gotten away with this murder and gone on to become an officer in the field." Dickensheet shuddered at the possibility. "As if we don't have enough problems . . ."

"I don't understand how Granger could join the force under an assumed name," Cedric said. "I mean, if his real name is Granger and you knew him as Spellman—"

"Spellman is the name of the family who adopted him out of the orphanage he ended up in after his father died. As far as our people knew, that was his real name. I mean, you usually don't check back past a kid's sixth birthday. We might never have known he was Boltan's partner's son if he hadn't admitted it himself tonight."

"What else did he say?" I asked.

"Not much. He talked freely enough about who he was and his motives, but when we started asking him about the details of the murder, he closed up tight."

So we all looked at Steele, who continued to sit there smiling to himself.

"All right, Steele," Lupoff said, "you're on again. How did Spellman-Granger commit the murder?"

"With a gun," Steele told him.

"Now look—"

Steele held up a placating hand. "Very well," he said, "although you must realize that I dislike explaining any illusion." He began to rock gently in the chair. "Granger used a clever variant on an illusion first used by Houdini. As Houdini did it, the magician rode into an arena—this was a major effect only done in stadiums and arenas—on a white horse, dressed in flowing Arabian robes. His several assistants, clad in red work suits, would grab the horse. Houdini would then stand up in the saddle and fire a gun in the air, at which second a previously arranged action of some type would direct all eyes to another part of the arena. During that instant, Houdini would vanish; and his assistants would then lead the horse out."

Dickensheet asked, "So how did he do it?"

"By a costume change. He would be wearing, underneath the Arabian robes, a red work suit like his assistants; the robes were specially-made breakaway gar-

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ments, which he could get out of in a second, roll into a ball, and hide beneath his work suit. So he became one of the assistants and went out with them and the horse.

"Spellman's vanishing act was worked in much the same way. He probably donned his breakaway costume and false beard in the men's room just prior to Boltan's act, *over* his police uniform, and made sure he was picked from the audience by being there standing up when Boltan did the selecting. After he shot Boltan and ran into the dressing room through the curtain, he pulled off his breakaway costume and false hair, rolled them into a bundle and stuffed them into one of the costume trunks. Next he backed against the side of the curtain, so that when the first cadets dashed through, he immediately became one of them."

"But we looked in all of the trunks . . ."

"Yes, but you were looking for a man hiding, not for a small bundle of denim and hair stuffed in toward the bottom."

Lupoff shook his head. "It sounds so simple," he said.

"Much magic works like that," Steele said. "You could never in a lifetime guess how it's done, but if it's explained it sounds so easy you wonder how you were fooled. Which is one reason magicians do not like to explain their effects."

Ardis said, "You knew all along it had to be one of the cadets, Christopher?"

"By the logic of the situation," Steele agreed. "But I had further confirmation when I remembered that, despite his somewhat scruffy appearance, the murderer was wearing well-shined black shoes—the one item he wouldn't have time to change—just as were all the other graduating cadets."

"But how did you know which of the cadets it was?"

"I didn't until I was on stage. I had found the costume and the beard right before that, and I saw that the guilty man had fastened his face hair on with spirit gum, as most professionals do. It must have been very lightly tacked on so he could rip it off effectively, but the spirit gum would leave a residue nonetheless."

"Of course!" I said. "Spirit gum fluoresces under ultraviolet light."

Steele smiled. "Not very much, but enough for me to have detected the outline of a chin and upper lip when I looked for them in the darkness."

Lupoff and Dickensheet seemed baffled, so I explained that there were u.v. bulbs in some of the spots because they were necessary

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for Steele's spook show effects.

They nodded. Lupoff asked Steele, "How did you manage *your* disappearance?"

"The stage trap. I dropped into it, and Ardis popped out of it. Then she kept the audience's attention long enough for me to crawl to the coatroom, put on the breakaway costume, and approach the audience from the rear. When the lights went out again and she disappeared, I looked again for the outline of chin and upper lip, to make sure I would be confronting exactly the right man."

"And now your disappearance, young lady?" Dickensheet asked Ardis.

She laughed. "I walked off the stage in the dark."

"But we saw you, ah, dwindle away . . ."

"That wasn't me. It was a picture painted on an inflated balloon which was held over the stage for our show. I pulled it down with a concealed string while the lights were out, and allowed it to deflate. So you saw the picture getting smaller and seeming to recede. The method's been used for many years," Ardis explained.

Dickensheet and Lupoff exchanged glances. The inspector said, "All of this really is obvious. But now that we know just how obvious magic tricks are, at least, we'd never fall for anything like them again."

"Absolutely not," the captain agreed.

"So you say," Steele said. "But perhaps—"

Suddenly Ardis jumped up, backed off two steps, and made a startled cry. Naturally, we all looked around at her—and she was pointing across the table to Steele's chair.

When we looked back there again, after no more than a second, the chair was rocking gently and Steele had vanished.

Dickensheet's mouth hung open by several inches. Lupoff said in a surprised voice, "He didn't have time to duck through the curtain there. Then—where did he go?"

I know most of Steele's talents and effects, but not all of them by any means. So I closed my own mouth, because I had no answer to Lupoff's question.

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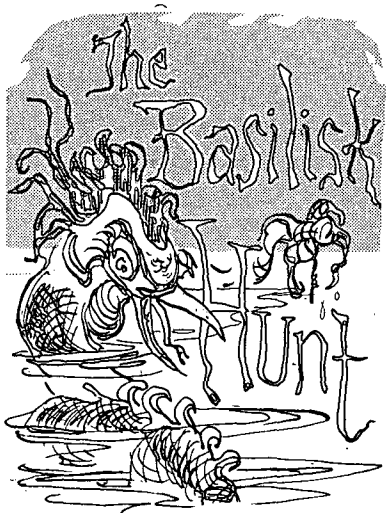
Following Will Rogers' belief, perhaps all one really has to know is what he reads in the newspapers.



Harry Couger had made his plans well, taking the money a little at a time, covering his tracks so that it took the auditors a full month's work to determine just how he'd done it. On that final day when Harry knew the story was breaking at last, he'd taken the $107,000 he'd accumulated and caught the first flight from New York to Miami. Then it was only a hop across the water to Nassau, and on to the tiny island of Quinquid, with its rolling surf and beaches that were almost as good as Nassau's.

by Edward D. Hoch

The beach wasn't nearly as sandy as those at Nassau, but to Harry Couger the place was still paradise. He could stroll along the water by the hour, never thinking of the life back home, the life he'd given up for this island in the Caribbean that had only been a green dot on the map a month earlier.

Harry would be quite content to spend the rest of his days on Quinquid, and since he was nearing fifty, the money he'd brought with him would surely be enough to support him in a reasonable style. The high cost of modern living had not yet reached this particular island. Sometimes, while strolling along the beach, he

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thought about the wife and daughter he'd left behind, but not often. His wife had already found other comfort before his departure.

On this one day, when life was sweet and a stiff southern breeze was whitening the incoming waves, Harry Couger noticed a small motor launch up ahead, perilously close to shore. A tall, deeply tanned man in bathing trunks stood at the stern of the launch, using a winch to pull something from the sand on a cable.

"You're awfully close," Harry called out, splashing through the surf toward the launch. "What you got there anyway?"

The man turned to smile at him, showing a row of gleaming white teeth. "Take a look!"

Harry saw to his amazement that a rusty cylinder of metal was beginning to emerge from the tidal sand. "It's an old cannon," he breathed, not quite believing it.

"Right! Off a British man-of-war sunk here a hundred and sixty years ago. Stand clear!"

The cannon burst free of its sandy grave all at once, and was pulled through the shallow water to the launch. Harry waded out and helped hoist it over the side. "What are you going to do with it?" he asked. "Keep it or what?"

"Sell it to someone. Maybe a museum. Come aboard—you deserve a beer for your help." He held out a hand and added, "People call me Prophet Jones."

"Thanks. I'm Harry Couger."

The suntanned man was younger than Harry, perhaps around forty; but with the powerful build of a man still in his twenties. Harry accepted the proffered beer and sat down on the edge of the boat. "Nice craft you've got here. You own it?"

Prophet Jones nodded. "This treasure-hunting business pays off."

"Why do they call you Prophet?"

"I predict things, but really more in the nature of a smart businessman than a true prophet. I buy at the right time, sell at the right time. On this little island, it's not hard to do."

"What's your secret?"

He smiled. "That's it. A secret."

"How'd you find this cannon anyway?"

"I read about the ship and started searching. Maybe I expected pieces of eight or bloodred rubies. I dug here a little and found the barrel of this old cannon instead."

Harry Couger sipped his can of cold beer. It tasted good and he

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decided he liked this man. A month alone on the island had been fine, but now he felt the need of companionship. "I've only been down here a few weeks," he said. "I wouldn't mind traveling a ways on your boat, seeing a bit of the island." He added quickly, "I'll pay you, of course."

Prophet Jones squinted at him. "Companionship costs nothing in the islands, man. Glad to have you aboard." He extended his hand and Harry shook it. The moment seemed like the beginning of something good.

During the next few days, Harry spent much of his time on Prophet's boat. The craft was a converted motor launch, decked out with a cabin and superstructure to give it the appearance of a high-priced yacht. For Prophet, though, it was a work boat, and the winch was in use daily as they plumbed the depths in search of treasure.

At night Harry would accompany Prophet to the little seaside bars of Morristown, the island's largest settlement. They drank and ate and chatted with the girls who worked there, and one night Harry even found himself wanting to take one home. For Prophet, however, there was always some new scheme beyond a single night's pleasure—some treasure to be sought or channel to be charted. Often he would call at Harry's room over the general store and rout him out of bed before dawn, anxious to be on the water with the first light of the new day.

"There's something I haven't told you about," Prophet confided during their second week together. It was a calm day on the water, and they were having a beer together while the craft bobbed gently at anchor.

"What's that?"

"A wild dream, I suppose you'd call it. Remember the channel we were in yesterday?"

"Sure." Harry sipped his beer.

"Well, a German submarine went down there—a month after the war in Europe ended in 1945. I've often wondered just what it was doing here after the war was over."

"What do you mean?"

Prophet put down his beer. "The man who told me about it hinted at a great many fantastic things. Perhaps the Nazis had developed an atomic bomb in the final days of the war and sent this submarine on a suicide mission."

"Now you're dreaming," Harry said.

"I think so too. But there are other, even more interesting possibilities. A top Nazi, fleeing to

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South America on a submarine loaded with gold bullion. How's that strike you?"

Harry shrugged. "Ever tried to find the sub?"

"No. Costs too much for equipment." He downed the rest of his beer and stood up. "Back to work now. Today I'm after anything else we can find off that British man-of-war."

They searched again at the partly sheltered cove where Harry had first met him, dragging the shallow bottom with a rakelike device of Prophet's own invention. "I read about something like this," he explained, "for gathering clams."

"You read a great deal."

He smiled. "That's my secret."

Toward evening, after they'd circled the island twice, they put in to port at Morristown once more. There was a girl in her early twenties waiting for them on the dock—a brown-skinned half-caste of a type Harry had come to expect on the island. "Prophet!" she shouted. "You must help!"

"What is it, Carlotta?"

"The ship! The ship from New York did not arrive today!"

Prophet glanced at Harry. "She waits for a package her brother sends each month." Then, to the girl, he said, "Never fear, little one. The sailing of the *Southern Queen* was delayed for a day by a brief tugboat strike. It will arrive tomorrow noon."

"Thank you, Prophet!" She ran away, excited and happy.

It was the first time Harry had seen a demonstration of the man's prophetic powers. "How'd you do that, anyway?"

The tall man shrugged. "I have ways."

"I thought she might be your girl."

"She was once, when I first came here. But things change. People change."

"Spoken like a true Prophet!"

Two days later, a man with a shaggy growth of beard stopped them on the street and asked Prophet, "Should I sell my property in the Keys? They're after me again for it."

Prophet Jones stared at the sky for a moment, as if pondering its blueness. "That company is interested in offshore oil rights. Based on other contracts they've negotiated, you should hold out for at least a hundred thousand. You'll get it."

"Thanks, Prophet! I'll remember you if it goes through."

He smiled as they left the man and walked on. "This island has all sorts. Even reluctant millionaires."

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"How'd you know about the offshore oil?"

Prophet Jones only smiled and said nothing. Harry began to wonder if perhaps he did have some sort of unnatural power.

The following night, as they ate a late supper together in the back room of Prophet's favorite bar, Harry asked about it again. "Do you believe in any of this voodoo stuff, like they have in Haiti?"

He gave a loud snort. "I'd as soon believe in basilisks!"

"Why basilisks?"

"No reason, except that people believed in them once—and actually hunted them in Warsaw in 1587, after two young girls were killed. The basilisk was some sort of cross between a serpent and a rooster, and it could kill with a look. *Basilisk* was also the American code name for that German submarine I mentioned the other day."

"You seem to know about everything."

As they were finishing the meal, another of the regulars joined them at the table. He was a man called Snigger, for some obscure reason no one could remember. "Prophet, I got a guy wants to unload diving equipment cheap. You still interested in that submarine?"

"No, my friend. Not anymore."

"I got another buyer," Snigger told him with a false casualness.

"Who?"

"Fella in a Cuban prison. He got word to me. Claims he knows right where the submarine is, and what's inside it."

Prophet Jones smiled. "He's not going after it from a Cuban prison."

Snigger leaned closer, then glanced uncertainly at Harry. "All right to talk in front of him?"

"Certainly."

"Well, this guy claims the submarine was carryin' five million bucks in counterfeit American money—stuff Hitler printed up during the war."

"Counterfeit!" Prophet snorted. "What good's that?"

"But it's perfect counterfeit! Even our government had a hard time detecting it! The Germans used it to supply their agents in America, and to pay off lots of people. The ones on the sub were plannin' to live off it in Argentina, but they hit a mine."

Harry interrupted at this point. "I remember reading something about that Nazi counterfeit money, Prophet. It was supposed to be good stuff."

"After thirty years it must be pretty waterlogged."

"No!" Snigger hurried on. "The guy in Cuba says it's sealed in air-

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tight metal and concrete boxes! It's still down there, good as new."

Prophet let out a long low sigh. "How much for the diving equipment?"

"Five thousand."

"I have some money," Harry said, caught up in the sudden air of excitement.

Prophet shook his head. "No, no. I can handle that much, all right—if I decide to go after it."

"*If?* Why wouldn't you?"

"We'd need the man from Cuba—someone who knows exactly where the submarine went down."

"So?"

"We don't just ask the Cuban government to release him. Castro doesn't work that way."

Snigger stood up. "Let me check an angle. I'll get back to you, Prophet." Then he was gone.

Prophet Jones shifted the talk to the day's activities, but Harry's thoughts remained with what Snigger had told them of the sunken submarine.

The following morning he visited the little room where Prophet Jones made his home. The tall man seemed surprised to see Harry, but waved him into the cluttered apartment. "Now you learn my secret," he said with a trace of pride in his voice.

Harry walked to a pile of newspapers and glanced down at them; the New York *Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a number of others. A second pile held a selection of weekly news magazines. "You subscribe to all these?" Harry said. "This is how you knew about the tugboat strike and the oil drilling and all the rest!"

Prophet Jones smiled. "The mail service to Quinquid is quite prompt. No one else here bothers about the news—except what they might hear on the radio. In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."

"H. G. Wells?"

Prophet Jones smiled tolerantly. "No, it was Erasmus, in the 16th Century. My point is that on an island like Quinquid, even a poor man like myself can become a prophet by simply keeping in touch with the news from New York and a few other cities. Even this island paradise is no longer an isolated place. Sooner or later, the events in New York and Washington and London are felt by the people here."

Harry sat down and lit a little cigar. "I've been thinking about that submarine business. Five million dollars is a lot of money."

"Counterfeit money, remember."

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"Have you heard from Snigger yet?"

Prophet nodded. "Five thousand for equipment. I have that much. But Snigger was in touch with his Cuban sources just this morning about the prisoner. It would cost fifty thousand American dollars to free him. That's beyond my resources."

Harry Couger thought about it. After a moment's silence he said, "I have the money."

"You have?"

Harry nodded. He'd reached a decision. Five million dollars—or even half of it—was a lot of money.

The negotiations consumed much of the following week, with Snigger finally entrusted with the money in cash supplied from Harry's hidden hoard. The week's weather had been a succession of calm and colorless days, as if even the heavens awaited the outcome of the bargaining. Finally, on Saturday evening, came the word that Snigger had made contact. The man had been freed by Cuba and was on his way to Quinquid by boat.

He was a little man named Jose Matto, with pale skin and nervous hands, and he sat at a table in the rear of Prophet's favorite bar. "I thank you for freeing me," he said, speaking near-perfect English. "But you cannot expect me to turn over the submarine's location to you for nothing! It took me weeks of scuba diving from a tiny boat to locate it myself!"

Prophet Jones hit the table with a balled fist. It was the first show of anger Harry had ever seen from the man. "We paid fifty thousand American dollars to get you here, Matto! Don't you owe us something?"

The little man glanced around nervously at Harry and Prophet and Snigger. "All three of you in it?"

Prophet waved a hand at Snigger. "I'll pay him off. Just Harry and I are partners."

"All right," Jose Matto breathed, wheezing out the words. "Then we split it three ways. I get a third for showing you the place."

It seemed to Harry that they had no choice. He glanced at Prophet and saw him nod. "Agreed."

"Where is the sub?" Harry asked. "Is it hard to reach?"

Matto shrugged. "Not really. Only twenty fathoms down. When the water is clear you can almost see it from the surface—if you know where to look."

"We will start tomorrow,"

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Prophet decided precipitately.

"Not so fast." The pale little man spread his nervous hands on the tabletop, as if to steady their trembling. "I did not get out of a Cuban prison to die at the hands of two pirates I have never seen before. I need assurances of my safety."

"You have them," Prophet told him with some exasperation. "It cost us fifty thousand to get you here. That should be assurance enough."

"I need something more," Matto said firmly. "Each of you must put up twenty-five thousand as a bond for my safety. I will hide it and return it to you only after the submarine is located and the job is done."

"That's insane!" Prophet shouted. "We have no money like that! The last of mine went for supplies and diving equipment!"

"And what if there is no submarine?" Harry asked.

"Then you get your money back. And one of you can remain with me at all times to make sure I don't run off with it. It's only fifty thousand altogether—one percent of five million! But you'd think twice before you killed me and kissed it good-bye."

"We have no intention of killing you," Prophet insisted. "But we don't have that kind of money, and no way of getting it."

Harry's palms were sweating. He'd already spent fifty thousand on the venture.

"No money, no deal," Matto said, starting to rise.

Harry began figuring quickly in his head. He'd left New York with $107,000 and had spent about three thousand of it to reach Quinquid and get settled. Another fifty grand had gone to free Matto. That left him with fifty-four thousand. He cleared his throat. "We could put up the money on one condition."

Prophet Jones looked startled. "Where in hell are we getting fifty thousand?"

"I have it, but that's the end of it. That's all there is. And here's the condition—that's all you get, Matto. Your freedom and fifty thousand. What's on the submarine gets split between Prophet and me."

Matto seemed about to dicker some more, but something in Harry's face must have told him this was the best bargain he could get. "All right. We shake on it."

"You won't run away?"

"Where is there to run, on an island?"

"We'll keep an eye on you anyway," Prophet said. "Keep you honest."

Snigger was sent on his way

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and the other two went with Harry while he extracted the fifty thousand from its hiding place in his room. He counted it out on the bed, then sealed it into a large manila envelope. This in turn went into a zippered overnight bag that Matto carried. Prophet elected to stay with the man until morning, and they went off to his room.

"Rest well," he told Harry as they left. "Tomorrow the basilisk hunt!"

In the morning a brisk breeze had come up, threatening to delay them. Harry was up early and waited for Prophet and Matto to arrive.

Finally, after a half hour, he began to grow uneasy. He went to Prophet's room and found it empty. From its window Harry looked down toward the cove. Seeing the boat was gone, he felt the blood draining from his body.

Then he saw the envelope, propped against Prophet's pile of newspapers. It was addressed to him, and he opened it. *Sorry, friend.* it read. *I know how you feel because it was done to me once, years ago. I knew about your good fortune, of course, from my newspapers—recognized you the first day you arrived. Snigger and Matto helped me, because they are old friends. There is no submarine, but then there was no basilisk, either. In return for your hundred thousand, please accept my apartment, and all my magazines and newspaper subscriptions. Perhaps you can be the new Prophet of Quinquid, while you wait for the next sucker to come along.*

Prophet Jones hadn't bothered to sign it. Harry read it through twice and then crumpled it into a ball.

Much later that day, he went down to Prophet's favorite bar and sat at his table in the back. For a long time he simply sat there, speaking to no one, until at last the girl Carlotta approached him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Sure. Want a beer?"

"I remember seeing you with him. But now he is gone."

"He is gone," Harry agreed.

"What is your name?"

He thought about it for a moment before he replied. "I guess you can call me Prophet. Prophet Couger."

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The cross that tries one's patience might possibly bear domestication.

Logan's Cross

He hadn't expected a woman to open the door. She was slim, dark-haired, and looked like she belonged on a college campus. The smoothness of her face made him acutely aware of his forty-one years.

"I'm Logan," he said.

She closed the door behind him

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and led him through the shabby apartment to another room where three men sat at a table drinking bottled beer. The man at the head of the table had very kinky, carrot-colored hair; *Red Lewis,* Logan thought.

"You the one that called me?" Red asked.

Logan nodded.

"Where'd you get my number?"

"Bobby Lee gave it to me."

Red smiled broadly. "You mean Bobby Lee Grant of Dallas?"

"No, I mean Bobby Lee Taylor of Huntsville Penitentiary," Logan said.

Red's artificial smile dissolved. "Just get out?"

Logan nodded again. He could feel the presence of the girl still standing behind him. He took a folded envelope from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. "These are my parole papers."

While Red examined the contents of the envelope, Logan studied the other two men at the table. One was big, beefy, square-jawed, crew-cut, and looked like a bulldog. You wouldn't ever want to let him get a hammerlock on you. The other was weasel-faced, acned, and had dirty blond hair slicked back like some wet-look punk out of the Fifties. He was the kind who probably carried a razor blade under his belt and you never wanted to turn your back on him.

"I was just over to see Bobby Lee two weeks ago," Red said, leaning back in his chair. "I told him then I was looking for a man, and he said he didn't know of anybody. Now out of the blue you turn up. How come?"

"Two weeks ago Bobby Lee didn't know I was going to get out," Logan said. "I'd been up before the parole board about a month before that, but neither one of us thought I'd make it. We both figured I'd get another year's set. Then the word came down that I was sprung. That's when Bobby Lee gave me your number."

"What was you in for?" Red asked.

"B-and-E, four counts."

"This ain't no breaking-and-entering we're setting up, you know," Red cautioned. "This here is a stickup. Armed robbery, mister. You think you can cut that?"

Logan glanced from square-jaw to weasel-face. "I think I can hold

by Clark Howard

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my own with what you got here," he assured Red.

"Smart mouth, huh?" said weasel-face.

"Yeah, a real smart mouth," echoed square-jaw.

Red tossed the parole papers back to him. "I usually like to work with younger guys," he said indecisively.

Logan noticed the girl move around and lean against the wall where she could watch his expression. He thought he saw a look of amusement on her face, but he couldn't be sure.

"I'll take my vitamins every day," he said to Red. "I'm sure it'll keep me on my feet until after the job."

"I'll think it over and let you know," Red decided. "You got a place to stay yet?"

"No."

"There's a joint down in the tenderloin called the Rex Hotel. Duane and Bulldog both live there." He nodded at square-jaw and weasel-face. Logan couldn't help cracking a grin. There wasn't much doubt which one was Bulldog. "Lissa will show you where the place is," Red said. "Then I'll know where to get in touch with you." He tossed a set of car keys to the girl. "Run him down to the Rex, baby."

As Logan started to leave, the weasel-face named Duane stopped him. "Hey, you, you're supposed to have just got out of Huntsville, right? What unit was you in down there?"

"Ellis Unit," Logan said.

"What was your assignment?"

"The Line." That was the farm labor force that was marched to the fields every day.

"Who was your boss?" Duane wanted to know.

"Boss Fitz."

"What'd he look like?"

Logan sighed wearily. He was tired of playing Twenty Questions with weasel-face. "He was a four-foot-tall hunchback who pushed himself around on a board with skate wheels nailed to it," he said without a smile. Then he turned and walked out.

In the car, the girl headed downtown.

"Can we stop by the bus station?" Logan asked. "I left my extra stuff in a locker there."

"Sure." She drove in silence for a block, then said, "My name's Lissa."

"Yeah, I heard. That short for something?"

"Melissa," she said. "When I was little I always used to say, 'Me Lissa,' and after a while Momma and Daddy got to where they'd tease me and say, 'You

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Lissa,' and finally I ended up just plain Lissa."

"Where's your momma and daddy now?" Logan asked.

"They died in the sanitarium down at Dykes. They both had TB." She glanced at him. "You got a family?"

He shook his head.

"Not even a wife?"

"No, not for a long time. I used to have one, but that was a lot of years ago."

"She leave you?" Lissa asked candidly.

"Yeah. She didn't like the kind of work I did."

When they got to the bus station, Logan went in and retrieved a brown-paper-wrapped parcel containing a change of underwear, an extra white shirt, some sox, and his shaving gear. Walking back to the car, he noticed Lissa combing her long dark hair and primping in the rear-view mirror.

"How old are you, Lissa?" he asked when they were driving again.

"Twenty-three," she said with a straight face. That would make her about twenty, Logan thought. Girls who were twenty always added three years when the man who asked them was over thirty, and heaven knows, he was over thirty; way over.

At the Rex, she went in with him to get the room. The desk clerk, a seedy old grouch with a greasy collar, kept eyeing Lissa suspiciously because the room cost more for two. "Don't worry, she's not staying," Logan told him. "She only gave me a lift over."

The room was as seedy as the clerk. Logan sat on the bed. It squeaked as if in pain. Lissa smiled mischievously.

"Bet those old springs have seen a lot of action."

Logan laughed. He got up from the bed, carefully raised the torn window shade, and opened the window.

"It's almost twelve o'clock," he said. "Want to go get a hamburger with me?"

"I better not," she said, glancing down at the linoleum-covered floor. "Red keeps track of how long I'm gone."

Logan nodded. "OK."

"I wish I could," she told him, moving toward the door. "But Red's kind of funny about things."

Logan nodded again. "Sure, I understand. Thanks for the ride over."

After she left, Logan watched out the window as she walked down the street to the car.

Logan waited until the girl had been gone for half an hour, then went out. He found a phone booth in a bowling alley down the

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street and put in a collect call to state police headquarters in Austin.

Within a minute he heard the familiar voice of Colonel Lansing. "How's it going, Sergeant? Is he buying it?"

"Not yet," Logan said, "but I think he's interested. I get the feeling he's going to try to check me out with Bobby Lee Taylor down at Huntsville."

"He won't have much luck there," the colonel said. "We've had the Department of Corrections transfer Taylor to the Ramsey Unit down south of Houston; partly as a reward for the information he gave us about Lewis, and partly to get him away from the main units at Huntsville. We figured Lewis might want to do some checking. He's one smart tamale, that boy. If he wasn't, he wouldn't still be running free, with a dozen holdups and two dead troopers behind him, and us not being able to prove any of it against him. We've got to stop that killer this time, Logan."

"We will," Logan said.

"Any idea yet what he's planning?"

"Stickup of some kind, is all I know so far. Probably a bank, payroll, something like that."

"Who's he got with him?"

"A little weasel-faced runt; Duane something, I don't know his last name. And a big clod he calls Bulldog, who has a face to fit the name."

"That all?"

Logan thought about the girl. He wondered if she had a record that connected her with Red Lewis. He decided to take a chance that she hadn't. "That's all," he said.

"We'll run these names and see what we get," the colonel said. "When do you expect to get in touch again?"

"When I can."

"All right. But you watch it, hear?" the colonel cautioned. "This is one rattlesnake that won't give you any warning before he strikes."

"I'll watch it," Logan promised.

Logan hung around the Rex for a week, just waiting. He took his meals up and down the shabby street, eating lumpy eggs for breakfast, greasy hamburgers for lunch, and soupy dinner-plate specials for supper. He sat in the lobby in the morning and read both papers; walked to a dried-up little park in the afternoon and watched the Mexican women bring their fat little kids to play in the dilapidated playground; and lay around his dingy room at night, reading Western paperbacks. A couple of times he went

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to burlesque shows just to break the monotony. Twice he saw Duane and Bulldog entering or leaving the hotel, but neither of them paid any attention to him, and he gladly reciprocated. They were only minnows, and he was after a shark.

Midway through the week he found a kitten in the park, a scrawny, mixed-breed little thing with its hair matted and its eyes stuck nearly shut. He smuggled it into his room along with a carton of milk and spent the better part of an evening feeding it and cleaning it. He used a handkerchief soaked in warm water to clean its eyes, and his own hairbrush to smooth out the mats and snarls on its body. After a couple of days it looked all right to him so he took it back to the park and tried to leave it there. He might as well have tried to leave his appendix. The kitten followed him back to the hotel five times; followed him across the street and down the sidewalk just like a dog. Four times Logan picked it up and took it back to the park. The fifth time he said to hell with it and took the pest back up to his room.

The kitten was lapping up milk from a bowl in the corner when Lissa came back to tell him that Red wanted to see him. "What in the world is that?" she asked when she saw it.

"It's a cat," Logan said peevishly. "What does it look like?"

Lissa scooped it up to fondle it. The kitten, unused to affection, seized the opportunity to nuzzle Lissa's neck deliciously before jumping back down to the milk. "Oh, it's precious," Lissa said, following it to the floor to pet it while the kitten resumed lapping milk. "What's its name?"

"It hasn't got a name," Logan mumbled.

"Well, it *has* to have a name," she said indignantly. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"How would I know?" Logan answered irritably. He had no business getting mixed up with that cat in the first place. He watched Lissa happily stroking the kitten's arched back. "Do you want it?" he asked.

She got up off the floor, sighing. "I couldn't. Red doesn't like pets. I had a little canary bird once and he made me give it away. Every time a dog comes up to him on the street, he kicks it."

Figures, Logan thought. *Dogs and state troopers use all due caution when approaching.*

On the way to the apartment, Logan said moodily, "Why do you stay with somebody like Red any-

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way? What can you see in him?"

Lissa, wearing a halter top tied in place at the neck and back, shrugged her tanned young shoulders. "A girl does the best she can. There's not many opportunities for an East Texas farm girl who lived with relatives that didn't want her and only got as far as the ninth grade. The only work I ever done in my life was chop cotton." She raised her chin an inch in symbolic defiance. "I'd stay with ten like Red Lewis before I'd be a common field hand again." Glancing over at him, her eyes were almost angry. "I suppose you think I'm trash."

Logan shook his head. "No, I don't," he told her quietly. "You're just like the rest of us. Trying to get along the best way you can."

When they got to the apartment there was a repeat of the same scene as the first time Logan had been there: Red Lewis at the head of the table, with Bulldog on one side and weasel Duane on the other.

"I tried to get a message in to Bobby Lee over at Huntsville," Red told him tonelessly, "and I found out he ain't there no more. He's been transferred somewheres. That seem peculiar to you?"

"No," Logan said, "that don't seem peculiar to me at all. Bobby Lee had a transfer request in for a long time to get moved down south to the Ramsey Unit. He's got a girl lives down there in the Brazos River bottomland someplace. Wanted her to be able to visit him more often."

"He never mentioned no Brazos River girl to me," Red said.

"Maybe he didn't figure it was any of your business," Logan replied levelly. He locked eyes with Red, not yielding a blink. "Look, sport, I've been hanging around this town a week waiting for you to get your act together. Now I come back over here and you start with the third degree again. I'm tired of playing games with you. Either I'm in on this job or I'm not. Make up your mind."

Red had not flinched from the stare-down; his eyes were still riveted to Logan's. He thought about it for a full minute; a long, silent, heavy minute. Then he made his decision.

"No, you're not in," he said evenly. "Nothing personal, understand. I just don't know enough about you, is all. Besides, like I said, I'm used to working with younger guys."

"OK by me, sport," Logan said. "You can get your help from the nearest junior high for all I care." He turned to go.

"Wait a minute," Red said. He

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threw two hundred-dollar bills on the table. "I tied up a week of your time."

"Keep your money," Logan sneered. "You're not talking to a panhandler." He walked out.

Back downtown, he went to the bowling alley and called Austin again. "He didn't go for it," he told Colonel Lansing. "Not being able to contact Bobby Lee Taylor scared him off."

"Is it possible he's on to you?" the colonel asked.

"No, I don't think so. He offered me two hundred dollars for keeping me waiting around a week."

Lansing grunted. "You should have taken it. For the Widows and Orphans Fund. At least we'd have got something for your time."

"You should have sent a younger man," Logan said. "Lewis might have trusted a younger man. I'm getting too old for this spooky stuff."

"Sure, sending a younger man would be fine," the colonel said. "Except that they don't know how to handle themselves; they don't have the background or the savvy that somebody like you has. So maybe Lewis *doesn't* trust him; maybe Lewis sees through him right off. What then? I'll tell you what: we've got three dead state policemen instead of just two."

Logan sighed heavily. "What do you want me to do now?"

The colonel was silent for a moment, thinking. "You don't have any idea what the job is? Or where or when?"

"Not a notion," Logan said. "Just that it's a stickup."

"Tell you what," Lansing said, "why don't you just hang around there for a few more days. Make like you're looking to set up a one-man job on your own. It might convince Lewis that you're OK. He might change his mind and invite you back to the party."

"I wouldn't count on it, Colonel, but I'll give it a shot if you say so."

After he hung up, Logan went over to the bowling alley bar and straddled a stool. "Let me have a bottle of beer," he said to the bartender.

He sat at the bar drinking beer for an hour. He was very tired; not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, psychologically, the works. If he were a combat soldier, what he had would be called battle fatigue. In one more month he would have been a policeman for twenty years; on a motorcycle in uniform, in a car in uniform, in a car in plainclothes, in the Department of Investigation doing administrative work, and finally

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back in the field going undercover. And for what? You lock a punk up and two more crawled out from under some rock to take his place. The population of Huntsville kept increasing every year, and *still* there were more and more punks to cope with on the street. Texas had the longest sentences and the toughest parole system of any state in the country—and the crime rate still kept climbing.

I'm getting out, he decided. Next month, when his twenty years were up, when his pension was guaranteed, he was going to quit. He'd had it up to his throat working for a system that, when it came right down to the bottom line, produced girls like Lissa who had to choose between being field hands or—

Yeah, that was it, wasn't it? he asked himself. That was the real reason; not the years or the frustrations or the system.

It was the girl. It was Lissa. That's what had got to him.

It was past midnight when Logan heard the soft knock. He took his gun from under the mattress and stood against the wall next to the door. "Who is it?"

"Me. Lissa."

He opened the door, instinctively knowing she was alone. You Lissa, huh?" he said with a grin.

She smiled at him, briefly, tentatively, and went over to sit on the bed. The kitten, which was already there, crawled onto her lap at once.

"Is anything the matter?" Logan asked.

She shrugged self-consciously. "I just was wondering what you were going to do now. Where you'd be going."

"I don't know yet." He put the gun on the dresser. "How'd you get away from Red? I thought you said he kept close track of you."

"He got drunk and passed out a little while ago."

"Duane and Bulldog still live here," he reminded her. "Suppose they see you?"

"I came through the alley and up the fire stairs." She smiled shyly. "Are you worried about me?"

"I wouldn't want anything to happen to you on my account," he admitted. He turned a straight chair around and sat on it with his arms folded across the back. He watched her scratching the kitten's chin as it squirmed ecstatically.

"Have you given the kitten a name yet?" she asked.

Logan nodded. "I found out it's a boy. I named him Ulysses."

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"Why in the world did you pick that name?"

"If it had been a girl kitten, I was going to name it Melissa after you," he said. "Since it turned out to be a boy, and I couldn't think of a name that sounded like Melissa, I gave him one that sounded like 'You Lissa.' Get it? You Lissa. Ulysses."

"I get it," she said softly. She hugged the kitten closer to her. "In a way I'm glad now that Red's not taking you along on the job he's planning. If anything happened to you, there'd be nobody to take care of poor little Ulysses."

Something clicked in Logan's head. "What makes you think anything's going to happen?" he asked casually. "I've been told that Red usually plans his jobs pretty good."

"He does," Lissa said. "When it comes to ordinary holdups, he's probably the best in Texas. But this one, it's not no ordinary holdup. This time he's not stealing from people who'll send the law after him. This time he's stealing from people who'll send killers after him."

"What do you mean? What people?"

"He's going to rob three men who are coming down to McAllen to buy dope. There's supposed to be a big shipment of the stuff being smuggled across the border from Reynosa. Those men are driving down from St. Louis to pick it up. Red knows who they are and where they plan to stay in McAllen. He and the others are going to hold them up and take the money before the men can buy the dope."

"How much money does Red think they'll be carrying?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars."

Logan pursed his lips in a silent whistle. No wonder Red was being so cautious. Hijacking syndicate money from one of the big Midwestern outfits was very risky business. Every contract killer from Chicago to Kansas City would be out trying to collect the bounty on that one.

Logan rose and paced the room several times. The seed of a wild thought was churning around in his mind. "Listen," he said urgently after several moments, "I've got to know something. I've got to know how you feel about Red. I've got to know whether you care for him or not. Do you?"

Lissa looked down at the floor. "He's taken care of me," she said quietly. "But he's not gentle or loving or nice to be with. And," she sighed heavily, "I've done as much for him as he has for me, so

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I guess we're about even." She raised her eyes to meet Logan's. "No, I don't care for him. Not like I'm beginning to care for you."

Logan sat on the bed next to her. Their shoulders touched and, to its delight, they both petted the kitten at the same time. "You want to throw in with Ulysses and me?" Logan asked.

"If you want me to," Lissa said quietly.

"We want you to," Logan said.

He leaned over and they kissed. A moment later Ulysses was upset because he wasn't being petted anymore.

Three days later, outside the town of Alice, which lay halfway between McAllen and San Antonio, Logan waited hidden in an empty grain hutch used to store calf feed on the range. The hutch was about the size of a double garage, with doors that opened at both ends, and rows of bins inside to which the calves were led at feeding time. It was behind one of these bins that Logan was crouched, holding his gun, waiting for Red Lewis and Duane and Bulldog to show.

Lissa was outside, sitting in Red's car. Red and the others were in a rented car, at that moment heading north from McAllen. It was just past dawn. The plan had been for Red and his partners to hold up the desk clerk at the motel where the syndicate couriers were staying, get a passkey, and burst in on them while they were still asleep. After grabbing the money, they would leave the clerk and the three couriers bound and gagged in the room, and head north.

At the grain hutch outside Alice, they were to stop and divide the take: half for Red, the balance to be divided between Duane and Bulldog. After the split, Duane and Bulldog would take the rented car and head for San Antonio, while Red, who would be met there by Lissa, would take his own car and cut east to Corpus Christi.

It was a good plan, and it would have worked perfectly—if Logan hadn't come along.

The rented car came trailing dust down the gravel road at half past seven, and pulled up at the side of the grain hutch. Seconds later, Logan heard the rear doors being pulled open, and early morning light slanted in over the empty bins.

"Bring that zipper bag in here, Lissa," Logan heard Red yell. Through a broken slat in the bin he was hiding behind, he saw Red open a suitcase full of money.

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"Look at that, will you?" Duane said in awe. "All fifties and hundreds—"

"All right, let's start cutting it up," Red said soberly.

"Hold it right there," Logan said in a quiet but firm voice. He moved out from behind the bin, his gun leveled. "Everybody stay real still. Don't move your hands at all."

Lissa walked in with the zipper bag Red had sent her for, and Logan motioned her back outside again. "Wait in the car," he said.

Red's eyes narrowed hatefully as he looked at the girl. "You know what I'll do to you for this?" he said through gritted teeth.

"Nothing, that's what you'll do, you two-bit punk," Logan said. He stepped up behind Red, reached around him, and pulled the revolver from his waistband. "Move over to the left a few steps," he ordered.

"What for?" Red demanded.

"Just move," Logan said.

Red stepped sideways several feet. As soon as he stopped, Logan switched guns, taking Red's gun into his right hand, and very calmly and deliberately shot the holdup man twice in the upper torso. Red's body pitched across a row of feed bins and slammed into the wall like a thrown brick.

Duane and Bulldog watched wide-eyed and incredulous as their leader's body tumbled to a heap on the grain-gritty floor of the hutch. Then, in unison, they turned their gaze fearfully on Logan.

"One at a time, take your guns out and put them in the suitcase on top of the money," Logan said. "Very carefully and very slowly. You first." He pointed the gun at weasel-faced Duane. "Now you," he told Bulldog, after Duane had obeyed. "Now walk back out to the rented car," he said.

Logan stuck his own gun in his belt, grabbed a few bundles of money from the suitcase, and marched them out to the car. He had them get in, then stood back from the car and spoke very evenly.

"This is the way it's going to look," he said. "You two and Red hijacked a suitcase of syndicate narcotics money and came back here to divvy it up. You had an argument over the shares and one of you got the drop on Red and shot him with his own gun. Then the two of you took off with the money. As soon as Red's body is found, there's going to be two kinds of hunters looking for you: lawmen and hit-men. If the lawmen catch you, you'll be tried for Red's murder. You'll tell some

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wild story about it being done by an ex-con named Logan who just got out of Huntsville, but nobody will believe you. And take my word for it, your lawyers can check prison records from now until doomsday and they won't come up with a thing. Of course, all that might not be necessary because the hit-men might find you before the lawmen, in which case it'll all be over for both of you. Now my advice to you two is this: move fast and move far. Split up and go your separate ways. Each of you find someplace as far away from Texas as you can get: Alaska, Canada, Rhode Island, anyplace. Get honest jobs and settle down. Let's face it, neither one of you is smart enough to be a crook; if you were, you'd have spotted me for a setup the minute I walked in." Logan stepped closer to the car and tossed the few bundles of money through the window. "There's probably four or five thousand there; more than enough to get you both well on your way. While you're getting out of Texas, keep remembering that there could be three dead men in that grain hutch instead of just one. Now get going."

Logan watched until the rented car and the dust trail it made were completely out of sight down the country road; then he went back into the hutch, put Red's gun with the others, and closed the suitcase full of money. As he started to leave the hutch, he looked over at Red's body with the two black, soggy holes in its chest. Two good shots, he thought, both right in the heart; one bullet for each of the state troopers Red Lewis had killed.

He walked out to the car where Lissa waited, feeling no remorse.

A month later, Logan put in for early retirement. Two months later, when his papers came through, he went in to say goodbye to Colonel Lansing.

"We're going to miss you," the senior trooper said. "Men like you are hard to find."

Logan shrugged. "My heart's not in it anymore, Colonel. I'm tired."

"I understand," the colonel said. "Well, I'll say one thing, this has sure been a month I won't forget. First, there was that anonymous call to our station down in McAllen tipping us off to those dope smugglers who showed up at that motel with a whole inner tube full of heroin. Second, those three businessmen from St. Louis who were robbed right there in the same hotel, and refused to file a complaint because they said all they lost was a suitcase full of

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clothes. Then a week later those ranch kids come across the body of none other than Red Lewis in that grain hutch just a hundred miles north of McAllen. You know, I can't help feeling that Lewis was mixed up in some way with those dope smugglers and the three men who were robbed. What do you think?"

"I doubt it," Logan said casually. "Lewis was never mixed up in narcotics traffic. He was strictly a stickup artist—and I don't think he would have gone all the way down to McAllen to jump three men for a suitcase full of clothes."

"You're probably right," the colonel said, scratching his jaw thoughtfully, "yet there were three men who pulled that job, and you did say Lewis had two other fellows with him. We still don't have any leads on them, incidentally. Seems like they just completely vanished." The colonel leaned back in his swivel chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "The oddest thing that's happened this month, though, was that money."

"What money is that?" Logan asked innocently.

"Fifty thousand dollars," the colonel said. "Donated anonymously to the Widows and Orphans Fund. And twenty-five thousand sent to the families of each of those troopers Red Lewis killed. That adds up to a hundred thousand dollars, just out of the blue."

"Probably some rich oil man," Logan said. "Didn't want any publicity because of his tax situation. You know how Texas oil men are."

Logan stood up to leave. He and the colonel shook hands. "Yes-sir," the colonel said again, "we're sure going to miss you. You're a good man."

Outside, Logan walked down the broad steps of state police headquarters and around the corner to where a new station wagon was parked, pointed toward Mexico. In the station wagon was the other half of the two hundred thousand—and a girl named Lissa—and a very spoiled cat named Ulysses.

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One may find a situation, on occasion, where familial devotion taking precedence over prejudicial dictates could provoke minimal censure.

Rush Radiogram

by Patrick O'Keeffe

Toward the end of his afternoon watch Vincent Wright sat listening on a loudspeaker to an American radiotelegraph station broadcasting alphabetically in Morse the call signs of ships for which it had radiograms on hand. The *Roytan's* call sign appeared toward the end, followed by the word "rush"—immediate delivery of the message was urgent.

Wright jumped up and looked through a porthole at the after well deck below. Captain Jordan's body, sewed up in canvas and weighted, draped with a flag, rested on a bier constructed from wooden hatch covers and dunnage lumber, slanted outboard over the bulwark. Officers and crew off duty were beginning to trickle aft for the burial service, scheduled for four o'clock.

Returning to the operating desk, Wright glanced at the clock; he had a good fifteen minutes to spare. He tuned the radio transmitter to a high frequency for long-distance daylight communication and slipped a radiogram form into the typewriter. The moment the list ended and the coast station gave the go-ahead to answer, Wright swiftly tapped out his response, hoping to be the first to catch the coast-station operator's attention. He was third, however, and was delayed in getting the

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message. After copying it directly onto the typewriter as it came over the air a letter at a time, he acknowledged receipt, and then stared at it in alarm.

The radiogram was addressed to the chief mate, Bromwell, from Captain Stubbs, the marine superintendent; it read: "Cancel sea burial and bring corpse to port stop Widow demanding autopsy."

Wright sprang to the porthole again. Most of the officers and crew had now assembled, including Bromwell in his best uniform hat and fresh, starched khakis; he stood solemn-faced, grasping a black prayer manual, waiting to say prayers for the repose of the soul of the man whom he'd had every reason to wish dead, whose widow suspected him of having separated that soul from the body.

Mrs. Jordan, Wright fumed, had no cause to suspect that Bromwell had killed her husband; Bromwell had never threatened Captain Jordan despite persecution. The accident had made her suspicious, or else she was acting out of pure hatred and spite to put Bromwell in a bad light that would cloud his future. Yet, Wright reflected in dismay, when she came to know the circumstances of Captain Jordan's death, she would seize upon them as further grounds for insisting on an autopsy. An autopsy for any reason whatsoever would be fatal for Bromwell.

Wright sat staring at the message, still in the typewriter, immobilized by a thought: if he held back from delivering the order until after the sea burial had taken place, there'd be no autopsy. But could he manage to get away with it? The coast-station log would show that he had received the rush radiogram prior to the burial, and Bromwell would be suspected of having connived at the delay in its delivery. That, too, would be fatal for Bromwell. There must be some other way. Wright frantically searched his mind for it. He had to find it quickly.

Wright's acute concern for Arthur Bromwell was based on a deep friendship that had begun when Wright joined the *Roytan* two years before as radio officer. Both he and Bromwell came from the same down-East seaport town, both were in their middle thirties, and both were single. Bromwell, however, was now engaged to Wright's only sister, to whom Wright was devoted; he had once jokingly told Bromwell that if he didn't treat Marge right, he'd be missing overboard some dark night at sea.

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They had been happy together aboard the *Roytan*, a fruit ship in service between Baltimore and Central American banana ports, until Captain Garth died. He was succeeded by Captain Jordan, who thereby also became senior captain of the line. He was a dour-faced man of slight build and clean-shaven. No sooner had he assumed command than he sent for the chief mate, and shortly after that meeting Bromwell appeared in the radio room.

Bromwell was tall and lean, with quiet brown eyes and modest sideburns. "Vince," he said gloomily, "life on board with Captain Jordan is going to be pretty rugged for me."

Wright gave him a puzzled look. Wright was shorter but heavier than Bromwell, with an aggressive jaw and dark heavy sideburns down to a stubby moustache. Bromwell had never more than alluded to Captain Jordan in the past. "What's he got against you, Art?"

Bromwell sighed drearily. "It goes back to the *Maytan*. Jordan believes I got his son kicked out of the line. Young Jordan had been taken off his last ship as lazy and insolent, but his father had pleaded with the marine superintendent to give him another chance.

"He hadn't changed one bit. I had to keep after him, give him his second chance, but he turned out to be not only an insolent slacker, but also a dangerous liar. One evening when relieving the helmsman for supper, he put the wheel over the wrong way and almost ran down a container ship. When Captain Cady came running to the bridge after hearing the blasts on the steam whistle, young Jordan told him I'd given the wrong order. Luckily for me, the standby man was able to confirm I'd given the correct one. Young Jordan called both of us liars and whined that I'd been picking on him from the day he joined the ship, but Captain Cady, too, had had enough of him, and turned him in to the marine superintendent. That finished him in this line."

Bromwell turned bitter. "He must have concocted a pretty convincing story for his father. I heard from a friend aboard Captain Jordan's last ship that Jordan had it in for me. He left me in no doubt just now in his room: 'Bromwell,' he said, 'it might interest you to know that my son is now sailing as an A.B. aboard a collier.' There was no mistaking the meaning behind what he said. I tried to get a hearing, but he cut me short and said, 'Carry on,

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Mr. Bromwell.' I walked right out."

During succeeding voyages, Wright became familiar with some of the forms of abuse and humiliation a ship's master can bring to bear on a deck officer under the guise of shipboard discipline. Captain Jordan had Bromwell turned out one midnight at sea on the pretext that there seemed to be something adrift in the fore hold. It was nothing for Bromwell to put the bosun and his deck gang at some job, only to return later and find that the captain had assigned them to other work.

When Mrs. Jordan made the annual voyage allowed to captains' wives with their husbands, the voyage wasn't more than a few days old before it became evident that Captain Jordan would use her against Bromwell. The chief mate found a cadet in the washroom one afternoon and demanded to know why he wasn't up on deck at the painting job he had given him. Just then, the captain's wife came in. She was a small, sharp-featured woman with an equally sharp tongue. "Because he's doing my laundry," she snapped. "Are you picking on him like you picked on my son?"

That evening, Bromwell told Wright in the radio room, "Her eyes burned with black hatred. I walked out before I said something I'd regret."

"You should have dumped her headfirst into one of the set tubs," Wright fumed.

"I knew Jordan had put her up to it."

"Art, he's doing his damnedest to provoke you into something so he can get you fired. Why don't you ask for a transfer?"

"Vince, what reason could I give? That Jordan's riding me? He'd tell the marine superintendent I regard myself as above taking orders because I'm a senior chief mate, that I think I should be allowed to run things entirely on my own. He's sneered that at me more than once when I've demurred over something or other. He'd be artful enough to recommend to Captain Stubbs that I be left here, say he'd try to straighten me out for my own good. I'll stick it out till my vacation comes around and then try to work a transfer some way or other."

"If Jordan doesn't make you crack before then."

It was on the following voyage that Captain Jordan was found dead. It was a longer one, to Rotterdam, for during the summer months the *Roytan* and sister ships made an occasional trip with

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bananas to European ports. On the return trip the *Roytan* met with good weather coming down the North Sea, but ran into dense fog and groped by radar into the English Channel. The deafening fog whistle boomed out almost continuously throughout the night, and was lifting as Wright went down to breakfast heavy-eyed from broken sleep. Only Boxley, the chief steward, a squat, semi-bald man, was in the dining saloon at the time.

"Cap'n Jordan had an accident on the bridge this morning. Slipped on the wet planking as he stepped out of the wheelhouse and fell back across the sill."

"Badly hurt?" Wright queried.

Boxley nodded gravely, pausing as a long final blast on the steam whistle sounded through the open ports, their rims almost dripping dampness. "Mr. Bromwell told me the captain had sprained his back. He had him carried down to his bunk and then took over. He gave me codeine from the medicine chest to give him, but the cap'n wouldn't take it, only aspirin. He said no one was going to fill him with dope, like he wasn't trusting anybody. Mr. Bromwell wanted to radio for medical advice, thinking maybe the cap'n should be put ashore, but Cap'n Jordan told him *he* was still running things."

Later in the forenoon, Boxley came to the radio room to tell Wright that the captain wished to see him. "He says he's feeling a lot better. Not so much pain. He wants me to fix him a lunch tray and take it up in a little while."

Wright found the dour-faced captain lying with a board beneath his mattress and a pillow under his knees for comfort, with bright sunshine now flooding the cabin after the fog.

"The chief steward told me you're feeling better, Cap'n, and wanted to see me." Wright's tone was neutral; he had never allowed his animosity for Captain Jordan to show, not even when the captain had once remarked that it was a pity a nice young fellow like him should be mixed up with the likes of the chief mate.

"I'm feeling fine now, Sparks. That fall knocked me for a loop at the time, but I'll be up and around again in a few days. Now take down the ETA." The captain scowled as he felt a stab of pain.

Turning to the captain's desk, Wright picked up a pencil and a radiogram form from the captain's supply, and wrote down the message as the captain dictated it. It was addressed to Stubbs, the marine superintendent, and advised him of the expected time of arrival in Panama and the bunker

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oil required. When the captain finished speaking, Wright glanced up, querying him with his eyes, but the captain shook his head.

"That's all. I'm not going to mention my accident. Stubbs would only phone my wife and get her upset."

As Wright replaced the pencil and turned to go, the captain added, "Tell that chief mate I want to see him right away." The captain's voice lacked the usual harshness he adopted when speaking of Bromwell, sounding almost as if he had undergone a change of heart.

Wright stopped outside the door of the adjoining room and glanced inside. Bromwell was at his desk, looking over a deck work sheet. "Jordan wants to see you, Art, pronto."

Bromwell rose, with a suspicious glance at the radiogram in Wright's hand. "What's that, the ETA?"

"Yes, but nothing about the mess you made of handling the ship after you took over," Wright said, with a sardonic grin.

"He could have left it to me to take care of the ETA," Bromwell said sourly. "He's determined to run the ship from a sickbed rather than see me take over."

"He's got something extra-special cooked up for you while he's laid up, from the joyful note in his voice just now. I'm going to stick around to hear it."

Bromwell went out, and Wright heard the captain's door open and close. He was unable to hear voices or sounds from the other side of the wooden bulkhead separating the two rooms. Presently the captain's door opened and closed again, and Bromwell came in. He was pale and obviously badly shaken. He sank into the desk swivel chair, staring vacantly.

"What devilish thing did he cook up?" Wright demanded.

"Vince," Bromwell said, looking around as if suddenly aware of the radio officer's presence, "Jordan's getting his revenge. I felt it the moment I stepped into his room. I've never before seen him looking so malicious and gleeful. He kept me waiting, like licking his lips in anticipation. 'Bromwell,' he said at last, 'you were hoping to put me ashore and step into my shoes for the rest of the voyage. Well, I've got news for you. You'll never step into my shoes, nor into the shoes of any other master in this line.'

"He stopped speaking as a spasm of pain made him groan, and when it had passed, he kept me waiting again, enjoying holding me in suspense. Then he told me he'd received an airmail letter

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from the VP in charge of steamship operations just before sailing from Rotterdam. 'I was holding it back to read at lunch today,' he said, 'but I won't be going down to the dining saloon for a few days yet, so I'll tell you now what was in it. I want you to be the first to congratulate me. Bromwell, you'll be happy to know I've been appointed marine superintendent.'

"Vince, I turned sick all over. I didn't want to believe him. It was part of the torture. Captain Stubbs had seemed as permanent as marine superintendent as one of the pilings under his pier-side office, strictly a former ship captain serving in the final stage of his career.

"Jordan could well read my thoughts. 'Too bad, Bromwell,' he taunted. 'Captain Stubbs was taken into his brother-in-law's firm of marine architects, expanding in view of the new government shipbuilding program. As the senior captain, I was naturally appointed to the vacancy. You know what that means, Bromwell.'

"I knew only too well," Bromwell said bitterly, "but Jordan had to rub it in gleefully. 'It means you'll never sail as master in this line while I'm marine superintendent and, like Captain Stubbs, I've quite a long way to go to retirement.' I was speechless, Vince."

As Wright stared at him in disbelief, Bromwell went on. "He lay there, mocking me with a sadistic grin. It meant that all I'd struggled for throughout the years at sea had gone down the drain. Jordan would keep me around as a kind of permanent chief mate to gloat over, downgrading me if I appealed to the VP, blackballing me if I applied for even a third mate's berth with another line. I'll be lucky if I don't end up as an A.B. on a collier, like his precious liar of a son."

Bromwell paused, breathing heavily. "All at once, all the anger I'd ever suppressed over him surged up into a mad urge to wipe out that hellish grin. I wanted to grab him by the throat and squeeze the life out of him. I think I would have if he'd taunted me with another word. I got hold of myself and came right out. He chuckled as I closed the door."

"You should have gone back and strangled him," Wright burst out in fury. "You'd have got away with it, too—passed it off as a heart attack."

Wright strode out in a cold rage and returned to the radio room. He transmitted the ETA radiogram to an American coast station, and then sat brooding over the threat to Bromwell's future

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and the unhappiness it would cause Marge.

Wright was washing up for lunch when Bromwell came in and handed him another radiogram. It was addressed to the marine superintendent and regretfully informed him that Captain Jordan had suddenly passed away of a heart attack following an accident, and would be buried at sea on the following afternoon. It requested him to notify the captain's wife.

As Wright glanced up from reading the message, Bromwell said, "Boxley found him dead when he went in with the food tray. He called me in at once. The captain's face was distorted and tinged blue. I'm logging it as a heart attack, Vince." Bromwell added chidingly, "If the chief steward had heard what you said to me in my room, he'd have suspected it was something else."

Wright said, "Art, I'm glad for you and Marge."

Racking his brain feverishly, with the sea burial about to begin, Wright abandoned as hopeless his search of a plausible way of allowing it to take place. If only the rush radiogram hadn't come at the last minute, giving him no chance to talk it over with Art! Apparently the marine superintendent had had trouble in getting Mrs. Jordan on the telephone; she might have been away.

Wright became desperate. An inquiry into the circumstances of Captain Jordan's death would bring out that Bromwell was the last man to have been alone in the room with the captain not long before he was found dead. So even if Bromwell denied having killed him, and even if it couldn't be proved that he had, the suspicion would remain. It was bound to have an adverse effect on the new superintendent and his attitude toward Bromwell.

Eight bells were suddenly struck on the bridge, followed by the jangling of the telegraphs for "Stop Engines." Wright's moment of decision had arrived—and as suddenly, his mind was made up. He drew the radiogram from the typewriter and started down to the well deck to deliver it. He'd maintain his silence to the last, until the autopsy showed that Captain Jordan hadn't died of a heart attack—and then he'd reveal that he, Wright, had slipped back into the captain's room and smothered him with a pillow.

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Never underestimate the power of suggestion nor the recipient thereof.

A View of the Dead

I looked down at the body—and the night came back to me as if it were only yesterday . . .

As soon as I saw Tim Howell in the hardware store, I stopped and waited out front. I stood close to the windows, out of the way of the Friday night shoppers trying to get their buying done fast to beat the rain.

Shoving my hands deep in my pockets, I stared in the windows. One of them was filled with fishing tackle, the other with kitchen gadgets. There was an hourglass gimmick to time eggs. It reminded me of my girl who was at a teachers' convention, which had busted up this weekend for me.

When the clerk left the counter, I stepped away from the windows, into the doorway, lit a cigarette and waited for Tim. He came out the door, carrying a long brown-wrapped package.

"Hello, Harry," he said.

"Whatcha got there?" I asked him.

"This?" He held up the package. "It's a knife. A nice, sharp butcher knife for Ginny. Says she's getting sick of trying to cut tough meat with a dull knife."

We started on down the street, walking against the crowd. I dodged a smart-aleck kid who was playing tackle. "How is Ginny?" I asked.

Tim turned his head to stare in at the lighted store windows, moving slowly, close to the build-

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by Pauline C. Smith

ings. "Okay, I guess. Better, anyway. Down in the dumps."

"Tough," I said.

"Yeah, she's prob'ly getting tired going to the hospital just to bring nothing home."

Not knowing what to say to that, I said nothing. Why did I have to have a girl that had to be at a teachers' convention on a Friday night anyway?

"Got a date?" Tim asked me.

"No."

Up the street, people were waiting to get in the movie, double all along the line, male and female like in the Ark.

"Thought I'd fool around town a little before I went home. Maybe have a drink."

"Okay," I said. "I haven't taken the pledge. I'll have one with you."

"My car's parked down here a little way. Right on the main drag. I'll drop the knife first."

"Feels like rain," I said, working against the crowd, making my way diagonally toward the curb.

"Yeah."

The little stinker who'd just

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tackled me from the front, sideswiped me on the way back. I wished I was out at Carlo's with my girl in my arms, dancing to the jukebox.

"Here it is," Tim said. He opened the door of his heap and dropped the package on the seat next to a box of groceries. "It's the last thing on the list."

While he walked around to the front of the car to kick a bum tire, I watched the moon flip in and out of the clouds. A drop of rain spattered my nose.

"If I don't do something about that tire, she's gonna catch me out somewhere." He stooped down to poke the frayed edges of rubber. There was a blister on the tire and the casing was split. "That last hospital bill pretty near floored me. It cost more than the baby and four new tires would've."

He pulled himself up to slouch against the car and watch the people go by. "Everybody's out tonight," he said. "Everybody and his kids. Ginny always liked to come downtown Friday nights. She'da come tonight if she'd felt better and if she could've worked up enough pep to get dressed."

"Tough," I said, my eyes on a girl with legs.

"Yeah." Tim's face was sullen as he leaned against the car.

I jumped a cigarette from my pack and offered Tim one. He took it and rolled it around in his fingers. I lit my own and held the match out to him. He still rolled the cigarette. When the flame crawled down to my fingers, I dropped the match. A raindrop sizzled out the burning end of my cigarette. I threw it away.

What the hell. I could go to a show alone, couldn't I?

"Two zero marks," Tim said. "It's beginning to make Ginny jumpy. Getting so she complains all the time. Like about the knife." He looked at the cigarette in his hand, then tossed it to the gutter.

"She was slicing a roast for supper tonight and hit a hunk of bone . . ." Tim looked at me bewildered. "Bone, mind you. First she blamed old man Blaucher who sold me the meat, then she blamed the knife. 'You gotta get me a new knife,' she squawked. 'A nice, sharp knife so I don't have to bear down on it. You know the doctor told me to be careful.' "

Tim ran his hands down the sides of his pants, then hung his thumbs in the belt. "I'd like to cut out Doc Green's big fat tongue with that butcher knife."

"Huh?" I said, startled.

"He keeps harping at Ginny. Tells her she can't take a chance

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again for a year. So she watches all her friends' kids sprouting and thinks they're getting ahead of her."

"Oh," I said.

The girl with the legs came back the other way. I watched her tangle with the brat. I straightened up. I could still amble down and get in on the last show. A raindrop splattered the pavement in front of me and the street lights flickered.

"How about that drink?" I asked. "Might as well have a drink and go home before it rains." I looked up at the sky where the clouds were shoving each other.

A distant thrum of thunder sounded. The crowds thinned out. I heard the crash across the street where some clown was unparking his station wagon without looking. The main drag took on a little traffic and the farmers blasted their horns at anything.

Marty's sign, where we were headed, winked on and off like an eye that promised something.

"Timmy," we heard shrilly behind us.

"Oh, damn," muttered Tim. He hurried. Then, as if he figured it wasn't any use, he stopped and slouched against the brick front of a restaurant.

Clara Ketcham grunted to a standstill. "Timmy, I wanted to ask about that darling wife of yours." Her hat rode one ear and her sack of oranges had begun to split. She gave me a quick going-over, then dropped me as if I were something she'd already chewed on and found tasteless. She bared her store teeth at Tim.

"How *is* our sweet little Ginny?"

Tim glared at her.

"What an awful thing to happen!" She blinked rapidly. "Just like the other time, wasn't it?" Her sparse lashes stopped batting and she held him with her eyes as if she would squeeze out the story.

I lit a cigarette and offered the pack to Tim. He was blind.

"Losing *both* babies. Isn't that a coincidence? Losing *two*?" she clucked with hidden meanings of her own.

Tim glared at her, then swung away from the building and started on toward Marty's. An orange fell from the sack and rolled along the walk. I picked it up and balanced it in Miss Ketcham's arms.

Tim was mumbling when I caught up with him. "Fool busybody," he muttered.

All I wanted was a drink. Then, after that, I figured I'd go home to bed.

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"She's sayin' all over town there's something wrong about Ginny losing two babies, as if," he said helplessly and without understanding, "it was Ginny's fault. Like she wasn't good enough to have a kid or something. Like it was some kind of punishment, maybe. Fool dried-up old maid."

That's the reason, I thought, because she was a fool dried-up old maid. If my girl was here, she could explain it. She'd probably say it had something to do with Original Sin and frustration, and wishful thinking, and sour grapes—but she'd say it in two-carat words. My girl is not only smart, but educated.

"I ought to cut her tongue out."

I jumped. "Whose?"

"That old fool Ketcham's."

Marty's neon sign we were headed for trembled, half lit, ran the stuff through the tubes again and winked.

"Doc Green says it's on account of the way Ginny's put together. She's gotta wait a year before she tries again and then she's gotta lay it out on her back."

"Sure," I said. "Sure." We started into Marty's and I could hear three raindrops—ping, ping, ping—strike on his tin roof.

From the dark doorway next door, a humped-over shadow rolled out. It wiped its nose with the sleeve of its jacket and sniffled.

"It's Sniffy," I said. "Sniffy wants his glass of beer."

Tim stopped and the red light from the sign above made his face look hard as a garnet. "Good old Sniffy. The guy that never did anyone any harm. Hi there, Sniffy."

Sniffy spread his mouth all over his face and rubbed his nose on his sleeve.

"Come on in. I'll stand you to a mug of beer." Tim's voice tuned up like he'd had a needle change.

Rolling into the bar, Sniffy lolled from one side to the other, peering back at us over his beefy shoulder. I thought, as I looked in his eyes, all he needed was a keg slung around his neck.

He lurched past the bar and back to his favorite table in a dim corner. We followed.

He sidled into a seat and lopped his arms over the table. His lips spread, wet and wide. Tim and I got our whiskeys and a beer for Sniffy. First he blew the foam, then sipped it, like a kid sneaking up on an ice cream cone.

Tim watched without expression. "The old fool makes out Ginny don't want a kid or shouldn't have a kid, and there's Ginny, eatin' her heart out." Tim

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stopped long enough to swallow. "She's got an evil mind. That's what she's got."

The whiskey made me feel warm. I set down the glass. "My girl says it isn't an evil mind she's got, it's tattletale gray matter." I waited for the words to sink in and make like a joke, but Tim's expression never changed.

"People like Clara Ketcham don't do anyone any good," he said bitterly. "They twist words around." He called the waiter for another. "I'd like to poke her with the butcher knife and give it a twist."

After his second drink, he leaned forward. Sniffy was half through his beer. "You know Miss Ketcham, Sniffy? Clara Ketcham?"

Sniffy raised his mug, stuck his tongue down in it and lapped it like a dog.

Tim felt in his pockets. "Got some matches?" he asked me.

I lit a cigarette and tossed him the matchbook.

"Look, Sniffy." He tore off five matches and made a stick figure on the table. "Miss Ketcham. Thin and bony . . ."

I looked the other way and took a deep drag.

"You know," said Tim, "with all the choppers." He separated his lips and clacked his teeth. "She always pats you on the shoulder and says, 'Poor Sniffy. Poor, feeble-minded Sniffy.' "

Setting down his beer mug, Sniffy showed his snags. He nodded, hunched his wide shoulders, rubbed his nose on his sleeve and sniffed.

"She's always doing things for you, like bringing you bunches of flowers . . ." Tim turned to me. "Honest to Pete, that's the truth. He doesn't know what to do with 'em. He eats the heads off."

I stubbed my cigarette out in an ash tray and decided I'd marry my girl before the next teachers' convention came along.

"That's the way she is, the old blabbermouth. No matter what she does or what she says, she manages to make it come out trouble." Tim ran a fist over his jaw. "Everyone else in town takes care of Sniffy. But she just picks him flowers that give him indigestion. Just like the way she talks. It pours like honey, tastes like vinegar and acts like poison."

He brooded over his empty whiskey glass. When he noticed he was looking into the bottom of it, he called the waiter again. "And a beer for my friend, too," he ordered.

I lit another cigarette and watched Sniffy gulp fast so he'd be ready for the new one.

"I'd like to poke her with that

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butcher knife just once, to hear her yell." Tim leaned over the table again. The waiter set a little glass between his arms and put the fresh mug of beer in Sniffy's outstretched hands. "I got a butcher knife out in my car, Sniffy," Tim said as if he were sharing a secret. "You know my car. It's parked right in front of the Variety Store. The knife's layin' on the front seat, all wrapped up. All you gotta do is unwrap it, then you can cut Clara Ketcham just like she cut those smelly flowers for you. See?"

He sat back and watched Sniffy sip his beer.

"Knock it off, Tim," I said. "What're you trying to prove, anyway?"

He looked at me with eyes as dead as the gray linoleum-topped table. "Stay outta this, Harry."

I shrugged.

"Remember the way you cut wood for me that time Ginny gave you a big plate of noodles? That way . . . It's a nice, shiny knife. Just as sharp!"

Sniffy gazed at Tim with eyes all liquid kindness, as if he'd just been ordered up into the Alps.

"Finish your drink," I told Tim, "and let's get out of here."

"Chop, chop, like that," said Tim, slicing the edge of his hand against the table.

Sniffy gulped what was left of his beer, ran his sleeve over his nose and stared back at Tim. He tried chopping the table too, but his hand was cupped and brushed it gently.

"Right," Tim said, "just like with the wood. Then you won't have to eat any more flowers." He turned to me, his eyes wavered and the hard lines of his face fell apart.

"Holy mackerel," I said, getting up, "you're talking like a damn fool tonight, Tim. You nuts or something?"

He put his head in his hands and slumped while Sniffy made passes at the table with his limp fist.

I jerked Tim's shoulder. "Come on now. You've got to get home. Want me to drive?"

Running his sleeve over his nose, Sniffy picked up his beer mug to tip it up for a last drop, then he lumbered to his feet and shuffled out. I heard the door slam after him.

"Come on, Tim," I urged. "It's probably raining by now. Ginny'll be worried."

"Listen," Tim said, pulling his face out of his hands to look up, "Ginny won't worry about me. All she wants me for is something to yap at." His eyes got set. "The first time she lost a kid, she car-

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ried on, sure, but finally she snapped out of it and looked forward to the next one."

I sat down and lit another cigarette. It looked as if this might go on for some time.

"So we tried again." Tim stared at the stains on the wall in front of him. "Now she ain't lookin' forward to anything except to jump me for things. Like the knife, for instance."

Rubbing my chin, I watched the smoke curl in the air and remembered my girl was supposed to read a paper at the teachers' convention called, "Encouraging the Schoolchild."

"She feels inadequate," I explained. "She feels she's not being quite a woman if she can't produce a child."

"She does?" Tim said.

I nodded, wondering what the heck I was talking about.

"She sees other women having babies without a hitch. She tries twice and can't make the grade." I got kind of interested in my explanation. I warmed up. "Tell her any cow can . . . No. No." I shook my head. "Tell her it takes a hunk of fluff to grow a dandelion, but an orchid needs all kinds of things done to it to make it produce."

I thought that was pretty poetic stuff. So did Tim. His eyes got dreamy as the words penetrated.

"Yeah. That's good."

"Tell her she's the fragile type. Her baby takes preparation and care." I got to my feet again. "She's young. Anyway, third time's a charm."

It took a little pressure to get him up, but he made it.

"Better get right home to Ginny now."

"Yeah," he agreed.

It hadn't really started to rain yet, but the mist was heavy and there was a layer of fog just above the street lights. I walked him to the car. "Your windshield wiper work?"

He gave it some thought. "I don't know," he said.

I opened the door by the driver's seat. Tim stumbled at the curb. "Tch, tch," I said, just like Clara Ketcham. "Maybe I'd better drive you home." Reaching through, I opened the other door, then I turned the key he'd left in the ignition.

The motor spluttered a couple of times before it hung on.

I reached outside and tugged at the wiper.

It jogged once over the windshield and stopped.

"Hey," yelled Tim, "where's the butcher knife?"

I gave the windshield wiper another push and it fanned lazily.

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"You're sitting on it," I told him, easing out into the wet street.

Half standing, Tim felt under himself while I went into second. I could feel the bump of that bad tire. When I changed into high, it flopped Tim back on the seat. "It isn't here, Harry. I swear it isn't."

"Oh, hell!" The town had practically gone to sleep by this time, so I stopped the car in the middle of the street. "Get out," I said.

He opened the door and fell out.

I ran my hand over the box of groceries, then over the seat. "You got a flash?"

"In the glove compartment."

Tim stood there in the drizzle, not raising a hand.

I fished around and turned the flash onto the seat. After poking through the grocery box, I picked it up and heaved it in the back. On the seat was a torn length of brown wrapping paper.

I looked at Tim over the beam of the flashlight. "You and your big mouth," I snarled.

"Sniffy took it," breathed Tim.

"Sure Sniffy took it. Didn't you tell him to take it? And didn't you tell him what he could do with it?"

"I didn't mean it, Harry. You know I didn't mean those things I said to him."

"I know you didn't mean it. But does Sniffy know that?"

"Sniffy wouldn't hurt a flea."

I remembered Sniffy's gentle hands on my dog the time she ran a thorn in her paw. "Maybe he never had such a good chance."

The mist was beginning to turn to rain. The wiper chugged back and forth. Tim was becoming bedraggled in the street. "Get in the car," I snapped.

He got in. "What'll we do?" he asked me. His voice had cleared up as if the rain and shock might have dissolved the three whiskeys he wasn't used to drinking.

"There's only one thing to do." I was cold and I was mad. "We've got to get out there."

"Out where?" he asked stupidly.

I leaned over and slammed his door shut. Starting the car again, we bumped down Main Street. "Out to Clara Ketcham's, you idiot, before Sniffy gets there."

I was working the whole thing through my mind, trying to pin down the time element.

"Maybe someone stole the knife," Tim said.

"Someone did."

"Maybe someone else stole it."

"Sure. Everybody wants knives," I said sarcastically. "They're always stealing knives and leaving big boxes of groceries."

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"Oh," Tim muttered. "Yeah . . ."

I wondered how fast Sniffy could work his way through the ravine in the dark.

"He probably took the knife out, unwrapped it and dropped it in the gutter," Tim said.

"Shall we go back and find out?" I asked with irony. I could feel the bump. I groaned.

Tim leaned forward, staring at me. The street lights flashed in his eyes as we bumped along. "What's the matter, Harry?" he whimpered. I pressed my foot on the gas to take some of the bump out of our roll, holding tight to the wheel on the slippery street. "Why'd you groan, Harry?"

"'Cause I got a bellyache," I yelled at him.

Skidding around the corner, away from the street lights, I hit the dirt road. I eased up a little on the gas and the headlights flickered. The windshield wiper stopped in the middle of its journey; then with a couple of false starts, got going again.

"We'll have to go around," I said, giving the wheel a quick jerk as the car slithered, "but Sniffy'll go through the ravine. He can take that little path down the center."

"Will it take him long?" Tim asked, and I could feel him strain toward me in the dark. "Will it take him as long as us, Harry?"

I sighed. "You know how long it'll take him. You've walked it yourself."

The backs of my hands were icy, but the palms were sweating on the steering wheel. I squinted out at the dim, blurred road in front of me. I gave the switch a flick and the lights went off.

Tim yelled.

"Oh, shut up," I told him, putting the lights back on. "I was just trying to brighten these glimmers up."

"They don't work on bright. They just work on dim."

"That makes 'em about as brilliant as you," I said. "You and your talk of knives and flowers and cutting."

The wiper gave up and the rain poured down the windshield.

"Holy mackerel," I shouted, slowing up and reaching out to run my hand over the glass, "doesn't anything work on this heap?"

Tim hunched up in his corner of the seat.

"Lights. Wiper. Your head, too. It doesn't work either." Just then the wiper jerked forward and, gently, I pressed my foot harder on the gas.

The ravine, at my side of the road was a well of shadow. I edged the car away from it, the steering wheel jumping under my

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hand, protesting the rough road.

"There's the lights," Tim cried.

"What lights?"

"Clara Ketcham's lights."

"Oh." I took my eyes from the road a minute and, like little stars at the far end of the ravine, I could see the lights of her windows.

"Yeah," I said. Suddenly, I got the same idea in my mind that had been eating at Tim all evening. I wanted to do a little knife twisting of my own. "What'd you think? Sniffy'd finish up and turn out the lights all nice and tidy?"

The stars were getting bigger now and growing square, so you could see they were windows. We were making pretty good time over the slick stuff. The dashboard didn't have any light. "Get the flash out," I told Tim. "Turn it on the speedometer. I want to see how fast this boat's going."

Tim didn't make a move.

"You deaf?" I yelled.

"The speedometer doesn't work."

I tightened up and went back to watching the road and Clara Ketcham's lights.

That was when something popped and the steering wheel jerked. I leaned on it, gave it a twist. The car skidded a half-turn, almost pulling my head off. The motor died and the patter of rain on the roof didn't have a friendly sound.

Quietly, I said to Tim, "That was the bum tire. It had quite a bubble on it, you know."

He pulled himself up into a mute ball.

"Go ahead and tell me," I said, my voice rising a notch or two. "Go right ahead and tell me you don't have a spare."

"Yes I have, Harry." He straightened up nice and alert. "It's in the back, Harry."

I opened my door. Just as I got one foot in the mud, I remembered something. "Has it got any air in it?"

"It's kind of soft," he admitted, "but it'll be all right, Harry."

"Sure," I said. "Everything's all right. Everything's great." I stood on the clay, slipped and grabbed the open door.

Tim worked himself into action, scrambling over into the back seat, rolling out the spare, handing me the jack and the flashlight. Then he stood there, in front of the headlights, wringing his hands.

My feet slid me around to the rear of the car. I gave the flash a quick circle and turned sick. Two more feet and we wouldn't have to change a tire. We wouldn't have to go where we were going either.

The rain came down gently, but

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lots of it. In three minutes, I was soaked.

Scrounging around in the back of the car, I found some cloth. I couldn't tell by its feel whether it was something good or something that could be used as a rag. I made a pad of it to put the jack on.

Tim stood at my side, dripping and helpless.

"Well?" I said.

"Maybe I could walk it. It isn't far."

I had one knee of my good acrilan, acrylic, rayon permapresses in the mud, straining to get the jack in the right place, working half-blind by the weak beam of the flash. "Sure you could," I said sarcastically. "You could walk it and leave me here with this broken-down heap. You could walk it easy. And I could get some work done."

I got the jack straight, put the handle in and started to pump. The wheels squished free of the mud.

"Hallelujah," I whispered reverently.

I had to take it easy, figuring the jack would slip and let the wheels down again, or the car would roll backward. Perspiration ran down my chest and the rain ran down my face.

When the wheel cleared the mud, I edged away from the car.

"There we are," I said. "Hand me the spare." The only sound that came back to me was the same old drum of the rain and the patter of it in the puddles it had already made. I looked from the dim glow of the headlights and on down the dark road. Just then, as if it knew what I needed, the moon peeked slyly out from the edge of a big, black cloud so I could see Tim plowing down the road.

I swore softly. The only thing he was using his head for was an umbrella.

I poked around in back until I found his toolbox. Then I knelt down in a big puddle to work the lug nuts loose. The rain was like a cold room.

After I'd gotten rid of the old busted tire and was lining up the hub bolts for the spare, I thought about Clara Ketcham. She never really meant to do anyone harm. It was only that her tongue was a whip on life, striking back because she couldn't use it for love talk or lullabies.

The spare felt solid enough, but I knew it could use a lot more air. My fingers were numb as I tightened the bolts. Through a streak of lightning, I looked down the road which was lonely now without Tim.

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I jerked the jack out and tossed it to the back seat. It made a cracking sound. Probably hit the eggs. Dropping the tools in, I slammed the door and stiffly worked my way onto the front seat.

I started the motor and let off the brake easy.

The wheels spun.

I tried again.

The car slipped forward a little and backward a little.

I sent up a silent prayer.

Then, with a loud roar, I was out in the middle of the road.

The car dragged, with a pull to the left. The rain began to slacken. Fog swirls ringed the headlights.

The clouds played hopscotch in the sky, letting the moon pop out now and then. I was just ready to make the turn on the other side of the ravine when the lights picked up Tim. He was sloshing along, head down, dripping and muddy.

I opened the door and he got in without a word. I'd hate to be thinking what he was thinking. I hated to be thinking what I was thinking myself.

We skidded into Clara Ketcham's yard.

I turned off the engine and left the headlights burning. I opened my door. Tim continued to sit there. I knew why.

"Come on," I said gruffly. "Let's face it."

I found a gravel walk and the pebbles ran along under my stumbling feet. Beside the walk was a flower bed, looking pretty and peaceful in the light of the windows; it looked mauled too. Petunias, I think the flowers were.

I stopped at the front window. Tim leaned against me, breathing hard.

I swallowed and turned weak. Sniffy was in there.

He was all bent over, his massive shoulders drooped.

My veins were running with the same stuff that was pouring down around us and my muscles were as limp as the fog. I made it to the door and pulled it open.

Sniffy looked up. There was a smear of blood on his face. There was blood on his hand too—and there was the knife, not shiny anymore, lying at his feet.

His eyes looked out from under his hanging hair—they were as happy as if he'd just done his good deed.

I wondered where he'd left Clara Ketcham. I didn't want to go back out and nose around in the shadows by the side of the mangled flowers. I didn't want to search the house, either.

I heard the breath of a sound from the back of the house—the

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kitchen? My nerves tensed. I tried to make my feet carry me there—they stuck tight to the Axminster.

The sound was low, almost crooning. Did moans ever come out like off-tune music? I leaned, followed the chant.

Then Clara Ketcham came briskly in from the kitchen, and I rocked back on my heels.

She carried a glass of beaten-down petunias in one hand. In the other, she held a box of bandages. Her eyes were soft and she was using her tongue for an incompetent la-la song.

I reached out and found the table edge and gripped it tight.

"Miss Ketcham," I croaked. My voice carried almost a foot.

"Well, I swan, boys. Where did you drop from? Tch. Tch. So muddy too." Then she discarded us.

She set the straggly bouquet down on the table, patting the torn blossom heads. "See what Sniffy gave me," she said proudly. "Nobody ever gave me any flowers before."

I knew that no one had—not even her own flowers. She opened up the box and shook out some bandages.

I pulled myself alive at last and leaned over to pick up the knife from the floor. It had only one streak of blood on it—Sniffy's blood; the rest was mud and flower leaves.

The line moved fast beyond the casket. I hurried my wife from the heavy flower fragrance of the chapel out into the fresh air. She hates what she calls the barbarous funeral tradition of viewing the deceased. "A vulgar discourtesy to the dead," she murmured as we made our way to the car.

"Oh, I don't know," I said as I handed her in. "Viewing the dead might be a solace to the viewer."

"Solace?" she exploded when I was behind the wheel. "Tell me, was it a solace to you to look down upon that poor old woman lying dead in her casket?"

I smiled as I turned the ignition key. "No," I said, "looking at her dead today wasn't the solace. The solace came from knowing I did not have to look at her dead twenty-five years ago . . ."

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Like one's handwriting, a particular trait may be equally hard to disguise.

The driver of the Tomorrow-train to the entrance to Wonder World was a young, suntanned man with very blue eyes. He stood, squinting and smiling with even white teeth, on the sun-touched miniature red locomotive and surveyed the brightly colored cars to see that all the passengers had boarded. Only his receding hairline betrayed his mortality.

"Welcome to Wonder World," the pretty girl on the caboose began as the train pulled away with a brief toot of its whistle. Sam Laker, seated beside Lieutenant Trapp in a middle car, listened with half a mind to the girl's cheerful, well-rehearsed monologue of greeting and instructions.

It was January, and Laker couldn't get used to the sunshine and warmth of the southern climate. The warmth, however, was why he had taken two weeks off from his private investigation business to visit Lieutenant Trapp, an old friend from the New York Police Department who had, like a sensible bird, migrated south.

Both men were in their early forties, Laker of medium height, moustached and dark, with sadly alert dark eyes, Trapp with a touch of gray in his reddish hair, direct no-nonsense stamped on his face. Laker was happier working private; Trapp was happier working on a smaller force. Promotion

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had been swift and fair for Trapp. For Laker, there was in private investigation the freedom to pursue his career using his own methods.

As the multicolored train pulled into its station with another carefree whistle, Laker was curious to see if Wonder World was all Trapp had promised. The huge, nationally famous amusement center was the town's main commerce, and looking now across the wide lake at the vast fantasy city dominated by its towering and graceful castle, Laker was impressed.

The train's passengers got off at the entrance with laughter, children's voices and the clatter of cameras and tourist paraphernalia, then lined up at a series of booths to purchase their books of tickets for Wonder World's attractions.

"Shall we take the ferryboat or monorail?" Trapp asked when they'd bought their tickets.

"We have a choice?"

"Sure, all included in the price," Trapp said. "Monorail's faster," he added with a policeman's efficiency.

Laker agreed.

Within five minutes they had boarded, and the smooth, overhead trackless train had whisked them to Wonder World.

An hour later Laker's accumulated cares and griefs had almost flown. Wonder World's attractions were fantastic, almost completely absorbing. The narrated submarine ride, the parade of bigger-than-life-size cartoon characters, the horse-drawn carriages and streets of 1890's atmosphere alongside recreations of outer space landscapes provided another world of amalgamated wonder.

What cheered Laker the most was being surrounded by the thousands of similarly carefree and happy humans. It was a world apart from the desperate streets of the real world, the real world that seemed right now almost as if it didn't exist. That was the magic of it.

At noon, just when Laker and Trapp were about to buy lunch at a turn-of-the-century London pub, the pager on Trapp's belt emitted a piercing whistle and he excused himself to find a pay phone.

His face had changed when he returned. "We'll have to cut things short," he said. "Seems we've got a murder."

The trip back to the real world, the world that a small part of Laker's mind had perversely and stubbornly clung to, was like emerging from warm water. What was colder than reality?

Instead of driving Laker back to his motel, Trapp invited him to

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come along, cracking some joke about a busman's holiday. Wonder World seemed far away.

On the plush blue carpet of an expensive home in what Trapp had said was the expensive side of town, lay the body of a plump woman of middle age. She was well-dressed, and very obviously the lady of the house. Even lying on her side with her hands wired behind her and half her head blown off, she seemed at home.

"Shot once, it looks like," the tall, dark plainclothesman in charge said with a Spanish accent. "Marie Melquist was her name."

"Anything yet?" Trapp asked. He indicated that it was all right to discuss the case in front of Laker.

"No prints, nothing. Looks like the work of a pro. He didn't leave anything behind but the bullet."

"Neighbor phone?"

"The neighbors were home on both sides but didn't hear the shot," the dark cop whose name was Ortiz said. "Her husband called."

"Where's he?"

"At work on the other side of town. He's a vice-president of First Union Trust Bank."

Laker watched the plainclothesman, saw that he had some other portion of information and was relishing the pause before divulging it. He decided he didn't like Ortiz.

"It was a bank job," Ortiz said finally. "One of those cooperate-or - my - partner - kills - your - family deals. Mr. Melquist, the husband, sounded the silent alarm and the man in the bank saw him do it and ran. He got away."

"We'll check things out on the other end," Trapp said. "Let me know what the M.E. says." He started to leave. "Coming, Laker?"

Laker was staring at the body. The remaining eye looked peaceful. "Coming," he said.

"Ortiz was right about the Melquist woman's death being very professional," Laker said, when they were driving over the bay bridge toward First Union Trust Bank.

"I don't know that," Trapp said, braking the unmarked car momentarily and tossing change into the toll basket. "I deal in facts only. That's how I've gotten as far as I have."

Laker didn't bother to answer. It was the old argument; the reason, really, why he'd gone into private investigation. Trapp dealt with facts; Laker dealt with people. Laker believed the solution to a crime lay in the knowledge of the people involved more

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than in the factual details of the crime. Crimes, he often thought, were like handwriting. Each bore the individual stamp of the perpetrator, regardless of how hard he tried to disguise himself.

"Wonder World was better than this," Laker said, as Trapp drove the car onto the bank's parking lot. Trapp smiled in agreement.

David Melquist's office was tastefully but sparsely furnished, the sort of office where it seemed more loans would be refused than granted. A narrow-shouldered, gray-suited tall man with a long, straight nose and brooding eyes, Melquist shook their hands as he introduced himself.

At Trapp's request, he repeated his version of what had happened.

"There were only a few employees here because of lunch hour," he began. "They go early because many customers come in for business on their own noon lunch hour. The killers must have cased the bank and known that. Twenty minutes before noon a man slipped in behind the security guard and held a revolver on him."

"What did the man look like?" Trapp asked.

Melquist appeared grief-stricken and shrugged his thin shoulders hopelessly. "He had very long hair and a full dark beard. What else can I tell you?"

"Clothing?"

"Yes, of course!" He shook his head as if to clear it. "Excuse me . . . my wife . . ."

"That's all right," Trapp said. "Did the man have on a jacket?"

"A lightweight windbreaker—green, I think. Or dark blue . . . And he had on blue jeans and black tennis shoes—I do remember that."

Trapp nodded and waited for the banker to continue.

"There was no one in the bank at that time but one teller, my secretary, the guard, and myself here in my office. At gunpoint the man forced all three of them in here. He told me his partner was in my home with my wife, and if I didn't come with him to the front of the bank and give him twenty thousand dollars immediately I'd be sorry. He said his partner was waiting for his phone call at my home in five minutes, and if he didn't receive that call he had instructions to kill Marie, my wife, and leave." Melquist spread his slender, manicured hands palms out. "I . . . didn't know whether to believe him, so I asked if I could phone home to verify what he'd said. But he refused." Melquist's voice rose, as if asking forgiveness. "I thought

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he was bluffing then, and I was standing right here, where I am now, so I let my hand slide beneath the edge of my desk and pressed the button to the silent alarm."

"How long had the man been in here when you touched off the alarm?" Trapp asked.

"No more than a minute, I'm sure. If it had been longer, I might have thought . . . not acted so rashly . . ."

Melquist was obviously fishing for a word of understanding, but Trapp gave him none.

"I saw him staring at my hand," Melquist said, "and I knew he'd seen me press the alarm button. He became angry, so angry he began to tremble and I thought he might shoot us all. Instead, he warned us that the first person to leave the room would be killed. He fired a shot into the ceiling, there—" Melquist pointed to a neat hole near a corner, "—and ran out through the door over there that leads down a short hall to a back exit. We heard tires squeal in the alley then, and we got over our fright and acted."

"Acted how? Is that when you phoned the police?"

"That's when I phoned home," Melquist said, almost angrily. "And that's when I became really frightened. Someone at my house picked up the receiver on the second ring but didn't say anything. When I asked for Marie the phone was hung up. Then I phoned the police. You know what they found."

A woman in her late twenties entered the office after a soft knock. "Mr. Conners is *insisting*, sir."

"This is my secretary, Miss Dimitri," Melquist said. "Mr. Conners is my boss."

"Tell him to wait," Trapp said to Miss Dimitri, "and you step in here, please."

Miss Dimitri complied. She was a slender, blue-eyed woman, pretty, neatly dressed and with an impeccable hairdo. Every flawless inch the professional secretary, she looked as sweet and brittle as cane candy.

"You were forced into this office this morning at gunpoint?" Trapp asked.

"Yes, along with Mr. Holt, the bank guard, and Miss Evans, one of our tellers."

"What exactly did the man say to you?"

"He informed us that we were all going into Mr. Melquist's office, and that it would be unnecessary to knock."

"Did anyone answer him?"

"Mr. Holt advised us to be silent. It seemed wise."

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"Call Mr. Holt and Miss Evans in here, please," Trapp said to Melquist. Melquist looked miserable and pressed his intercom button.

Holt was an old man, a retired policeman, who said he'd been disarmed immediately and smoothly by the man he'd thought was a customer. Miss Evans was an elderly woman with young eyes who seemed in awe of all that was transpiring. She corroborated everyone else's version of the attempted robbery.

"Don't you have instructions in case of something like this?" Trapp asked Melquist.

Laker watched the banker rub his hands over his reddened eyes. "I'm instructed to use my judgment," Melquist said. "My judgment was wrong . . ."

"How long have you been an officer of the bank?" Trapp asked.

Melquist sat down, as if pulled down. He seemed about to weep. "Seven years. I've worked here fifteen."

"Can't you leave Mr. Melquist alone?" Miss Dimitri implored. She had moved closer to her employer and seemed near tears herself. "After all—"

"Of course," Trapp said. "Formal statements will be taken at headquarters, but we're finished for now. Unless you have anything to ask," he said to Laker as an afterthought.

"Is First Union Trust considered a conservative bank?" Laker asked.

Melquist looked up at him with a puzzled frown. "We're considered so, yes . . . We've grown slowly but surely over the years by being careful."

"That's all," Laker said.

"My thanks to all of you," Trapp said, "and we'll be talking to you later."

Laker and Trapp left by the rear door, the same door the would-be armed robber had used. In the alley behind the bank were two long dark streaks on the pavement where a car had accelerated rapidly.

"I never knew you were interested in the banking business," Trapp said.

"Didn't I ever tell you," Laker answered, "I'm a depositor?"

Trapp frowned at him and they walked toward two uniformed officers at the mouth of the alley. "Let's see if anyone got a description of the car," the lieutenant said.

No one had.

"In a town like this," Trapp said, as he was driving Laker to his motel, "the way we depend on Wonder World and a family image, a murder can be a damaging

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thing for a hell of a long time."

"Especially for the victim." Laker was staring out the window at the palm trees. "A man like Melquist, a cautious man who worked his way to the top in a cautious bank, can you see him pressing an alarm button with a gun trained on him?"

"He did it. Three witnesses saw it."

"And the gunman."

Trapp slowed and a gray tour bus passed him with a loud roar and the stench of diesel fuel. "You think he saw the opportunity to get rid of his wife and made a point of not cooperating?"

"I don't know for sure."

"And we'll never know for sure," Trapp said. "It's impossible to find out what was in his mind at the time. It's a foolproof way to murder your wife."

"And an easy way to rob a bank."

Trapp slowed the car even further and looked over at Laker. "I don't follow you."

"Follow Melquist," Laker suggested.

Laker sat in Lieutenant Trapp's tiny office and watched the light rain angle onto the windowpane. He could imagine the tourists at Wonder World flocking to the pavilions, restaurants and souvenir shops. If it even rained there . . .

Trapp came into the office. He was perspiring and he emitted a tired, brief laugh without humor. "You were right," he said. "We followed Melquist to a bar on Palm Street last night and saw him give a man named Paul Hojac a briefcase containing twenty thousand cash dollars. Hojac's wanted for murder in Oklahoma, and the story is Melquist hired him and a man named Ryan to stage the phony robbery attempt as a diversion for Mrs. Melquist's murder."

"And Melquist gave them the money they would have obtained if the robbery had been genuine."

Trapp nodded. "Only this way there was less risk—for everybody. Melquist embezzled a hundred thousand dollars from the bank, twenty for Hojac and Ryan, eighty thousand for himself and his secretary, Gloria Dimitri. He was in a position to cover up the missing money for a while. Miss Dimitri was going to quit her job in three months, then three months later Melquist was going to drop out of sight with her and the money." Trapp wiped his glistening forehead with his shirt sleeve and jerked a thumb toward the west wall. "There are so many people singing in there it sounds like an aviary. How did you fig-

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ure this one, if you don't mind?"

"By concentrating on the people involved," Laker said. "I've always told you a case can be broken through the criminal rather than the crime. A lot of things weren't right. Neither of Melquist's neighbors heard a shot, so maybe a silencer was used. And Mrs. Melquist was murdered very professionally—hands wired behind her, shot once in the head. All as if her murder was a foregone conclusion. Then there was the way the bank job was bungled. The gunman entered the front way, demanded a precise amount of money from the front of the bank, but had a car parked in the rear alley outside the nearest exit when Melquist sounded the alarm. From the start they were more efficient killers than bank robbers."

"True enough," Trapp said, "but what about Gloria Dimitri?"

"She was the cool career woman," Laker said, "until you badgered Melquist a bit. Then she lost her cool for compassion, unconsciously moved closer to him as she defended him. And Melquist, a conservative banker who unhesitatingly risked his wife's life by pressing an alarm button with a gun trained on him." Laker leaned back, looked out again at the rain that was now slackening. "Of course, none of it is conclusive—people seldom are. But the accumulative effect of what we knew indicated Melquist's involvement and a possible love triangle for a motive. Then there was Wonder World."

"Wonder World?"

"The way it struck me this morning," Laker said. "Did you ever notice how we can't live our dreams completely, how there's always a part of us rooted in reality that stays behind? It might not puncture our dream, but it can, and it's always there."

"I suppose," Trapp said.

"That was the case of Melquist's dream with Gloria Dimitri. He tried to begin a new life, but he couldn't really completely leave his old one."

"He almost did," Trapp said. "The whole thing would have been impossible to prove if we hadn't witnessed the actual payoff to Hojac. What I don't understand is, how did you know Melquist wouldn't do the smart thing and just send the money instead of making the payoff personally?"

"Why, it had to be that way." Laker looked at Trapp in disbelief. "A banker would never send cash through the mail."

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One may need more than a theory to obliterate obstacles.

Long Hollow Swamp

I think that very probably the most desolate region in New England lies northwest of Colbury. As you surmount the inhospitable hills, you drive between ragged meadows, cheerless and not at all picturesque. Tangled, wind-twisted scrub clings to barren ridges. At intervals long stretches of swamp lie motionless and forbidding, screened by acres of reeds and blackthorn bush.

As I drove along in the late afternoon light, a faint mist began to arise from the still waters hidden by the reeds. A sense of emptiness, of acute depression, took possession of me. I have always been peculiarly affected by certain aspects of landscape and terrain, and the countryside through which I was traveling was one of the bleakest imaginable.

However, I had no choice. Mayne Cordiss, my lifelong friend, had asked me up for a visit and I could think of no convincing grounds on which to decline his invitation. I had retired some years before; my health was good; and I had nothing whatever planned for that late summer and autumn. Moreover, I was a bachelor. My book-cluttered city apartment could collect dust for

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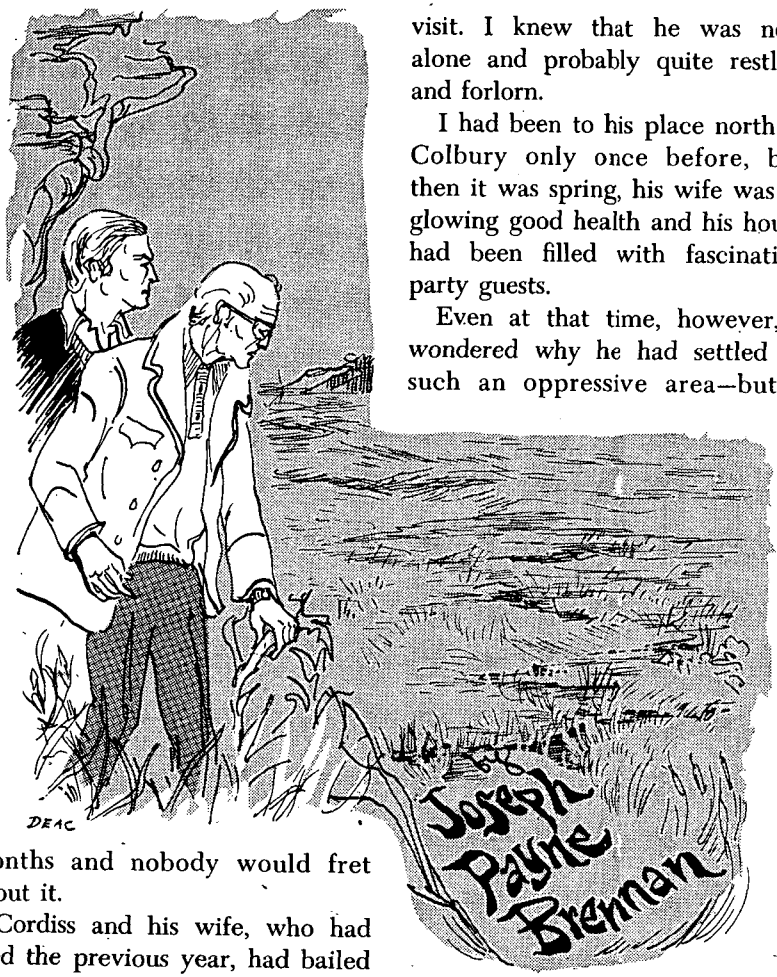

visit. I knew that he was now alone and probably quite restless and forlorn.

I had been to his place north of Colbury only once before, but then it was spring, his wife was in glowing good health and his house had been filled with fascinating party guests.

Even at that time, however, I wondered why he had settled in such an oppressive area—but I never asked. The building itself was cheerful enough and I had scarcely left it during the entire duration of the house party.

The Cordiss place was a big, rambling, renovated farmhouse set back about a hundred yards from the main road. I was appalled as I

months and nobody would fret about it.

Cordiss and his wife, who had died the previous year, had bailed me out when I was on the verge of bankruptcy and they had coaxed and cosseted me back to some semblance of emotional stability when my one "great" love affair turned sour.

When Cordiss telephoned, I realized that I could not refuse a

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rolled up the drive. The grounds looked wild, unkempt and overgrown. Hemlocks lifted against the windows and scrub cedar had taken hold where the garden had once flourished.

Cordiss greeted me with all his old enthusiasm and warmth, however, and after I had stretched out in a comfortable chair in his study, with a large whisky and soda at my elbow, I began to forget about the dreary landscape in which the house was located.

He told me that aside from a part-time odd-job man, and a housekeeper who came in only twice a week, he had dispensed with servants. He was a gourmet cook and he said that he never looked on cooking as a chore. He was happy to have someone to share his creations.

He had aged considerably since my last visit. His hair was starting to thin out and he had developed little wrinkles around his eyes. I felt that he was no longer his old relaxed, "unflappable" self; he appeared edgy and apprehensive. I knew that he was still grieving for his wife, of course, and put it down to that.

The late summer days passed pleasantly enough. Cordiss sensed my moods and made provision for them. I read, wrote dozens of long overdue letters, tramped the country roads, sat listening to my host's rambling anecdotes—and looked forward every day to his sumptuous dinner.

After a week or two I became convinced that something besides grief was troubling him. Frequently he came in from tours around his land with a scowl on his face. He sat brooding on occasion, which was something I had never seen him do before.

Finally one day he blurted it out. "Confound it!" he exclaimed. "There's something wrong with this infernal woods of mine. I had hopes of getting up a hunting party this fall, but I haven't seen a deer—or even a rabbit—in months. Maybe these rustics *are* right—it's Long Hollow Swamp!"

I looked at him in surprise. "Afraid you'll have to fill me in, old man. What's the rustic rumor and what's Long Hollow Swamp?"

I sprawled in an armchair while he mixed drinks at the sideboard. At length he came over and sat down.

"Long Hollow Swamp," he told me, "is situated on my property here. I've got about three thousand acres—enough to hunt on. Well, there's some idiotic local legend about Long Hollow Swamp. No details really, just that the place is baleful and obnoxious and that it has an adverse effect

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on the adjacent woodland—sort of an aura, you know. I've skirted along the fringes of it and never seen anything, but it *is* a spooky type of place. No animal or bird life around and a kind of listening *expectancy* in the air."

He took up his drink and laughed shortly. "I suppose I sound like some sensational magazine writer! Nerves, I guess."

I frowned. I knew that Mayne Cordiss had neither an overactive imagination nor fluttery nerves. "Have you ever—that is—*penetrated* the swamp?"

He shook his head. "Can't say that I have. Treacherous. Possible quicksands. And when you're out alone . . ." He left the sentence hanging.

"Why don't we tramp over there together tomorrow and have a look?" I suggested.

He acceded readily enough.

The next day—cloudy and overcast with a faint touch of autumn in the air—found us pushing over the hills through dense scrub. I noticed a few crows and one chipmunk but no other wildlife. As we went on, the rocky ground became marshy; pools glimmered through scrawny trees up ahead.

Quite suddenly we topped the crest of a ridge and Long Hollow Swamp lay spread out before us. The place was aptly named. The swamp was, literally, situated in a long hollow between two hills. It was probably two miles across and three or four miles in length. It was virtually roofed over with a thick mat of creepers which spread from tree to tree, from bush to bush. There were occasional gaps where tussocks of swamp sedge were visible, or puddles of brackish water. Not a sound broke the brooding silence. Although we stood without speaking for several minutes, not even the croak of a frog nor the harsh rasp of a cicada was audible.

"Uninviting place," I commented.

"Let's go down a bit," Cordiss suggested.

We trailed down the ridge to the very edge of the swamp. Suddenly Cordiss swore and yanked back one leg. It had sunk into mud up to his knee. He glanced around. "See what I mean?"

I nodded. "Treacherous is the word. I'll bet more than a few deer have been trapped in that mud. If it isn't quicksand, it might as well be."

We decided to walk along the edge for some distance in the hope of finding more stable ground. After a few minutes, we came to a knoll which lifted slightly above the general level of the swamp. It looked reasonably

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firm, but caution was in order.

Walking carefully, we pushed out onto it. It extended only a few hundred feet, however, and then sloped off abruptly into a morass of soft mud and straggling saw grass.

Cordiss stopped, shaking his head. "Far as we get, I guess. That stuff ahead wouldn't hold up a hare, much less the two of us."

"You're right," I agreed. "But I don't think there's any real mystery here, Cordiss. Undoubtedly animals *have* been trapped in the place. Over the years they've learned to avoid it. Maybe in rainy seasons the marsh extends up the ridge and beyond. For that reason wildlife have finally learned to give the entire swamp—and its environs as well—a pretty wide berth."

He appeared to accept my explanation but I knew that it didn't satisfy him. He spoke little on the return trip. When we retreated to the library for drinks, I noticed that he tossed double portions of whisky into his own glass.

As the days passed, it became increasingly obvious to me that the "mystery" of Long Hollow Swamp was actually preying on his mind. Occasionally he became morose and uncommunicative. I knew that he was still visiting the swamp site, but I seldom mentioned the place. I hoped that he would gradually lose interest in it.

Instead, however, his obsession grew.

I had planned to leave after a week or two, but as his mood worsened, I felt a vague but somehow compelling sense of responsibility. I hated to go off and leave him in a "blue funk," as he would have expressed it.

One rainy afternoon as we sat over drinks, he broached the subject of the swamp once again. "I've prowled about the place dozens of times now," he said, "and I haven't found anything that I can, well, put a finger on, as you might say. But I'm more convinced than ever that there's—something—in that swamp wholly malign and inimical—something deadly."

I sipped my drink. "How long have the rumors been going on?"

"Don't know exactly. Years and years. Seem to be passed down the generations by the natives here."

"In that case," I observed, "doesn't it seem odd to you that in all that time—all those decades—nothing has actually been seen? At least you've never mentioned that anything has."

"Nothing's been seen that I know of. If anything has, the locals are keeping pretty quiet

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about it. No, nothing but rumors . . ."

"In my opinion," I told him, "nothing's been seen, because there really isn't anything to see—unless you include mud puddles, quaky marsh flats and possible quicksand traps."

"You may be right, of course," he admitted. "But I'd still like to get to the bottom of it—and I don't mean the swamp!"

We both laughed and the conversation veered into other channels but I knew that he was still brooding inwardly. I suppose it arose from the personality and background of the man. All his life he had known power; he had possessed money and influence and he had always been in a position to make decisions and to obliterate obstacles. I doubt that he actually attached much importance to the projected hunting party. The swamp mystery chafed and irritated him because it had proved an obstacle which he had not been able to sweep away.

As I look back now, I have a fearful sense of guilt. I kept downgrading the business and I suppose to some extent I lowered Cordiss' guard. Had I possessed any inkling of the true horror which was to emerge, I would not have treated my host's obsession with such casual concern.

Actually, however, in spite of myself, Cordiss' uneasiness began to affect me. My appetite fell off and I didn't sleep well.

On a number of occasions I woke up to hear Cordiss prowling about, doors closing and the sound of footsteps outside the house.

One evening over dinner my host admitted that he had been making some "midnight excursions," as he phrased it.

"What in heaven's name for?" I asked.

He scowled. "I've developed a theory that whatever is lurking in that swamp, poisoning the whole damned area, comes out only at night. I mean to find out if my theory is correct!"

I set down my fork. "You've been tramping through the woods to that swamp in the middle of the night? Cordiss, you're inviting disaster! You could flounder in one of those mud flats and sink out of sight! Unless the wind was just right, I doubt that I could hear you call from the house, and even if I did—"

He shrugged impatiently. "Oh, I don't go out into the swamp. I know better than that. I just take up my station somewhere along the edge and keep watch."

I resumed eating but I soon found myself merely pushing the food around my plate. "I wish you'd give it up. There are too

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many unpleasant things that might happen—especially at night."

Noting the stubborn look which came into Cordiss' eyes, I knew that my warning would go unheeded.

Pouring more Chablis, he spoke with deliberation. "The business has become a bother and I intend to see it through."

Less than a week passed before the horror finally revealed itself.

I had gone to bed later than usual and drifted into a deep sleep. I began having a nightmare. I was locked in my room, it seemed, and Cordiss was outside somewhere calling my name, his voice muffled but filled with terror and desperate appeal.

Suddenly I awoke, sat up in bed and listened. Moonlight silvered the room and all seemed peaceful. Then I heard Cordiss shout. He was outside, not too far away.

Thrusting my feet into shoes, I threw a jacket over my pajamas, rushed downstairs and out the rear door.

Cordiss' cries appeared to be coming from the edge of the woods, a few hundred yards from the far end of the overgrown garden at the back of the house.

Running the length of the narrow garden path, while branches whipped against my face, I finally burst into a relatively open area between the fringe of woods and the straggling border of the former garden.

Although the landscape was clearly etched in moonlight, at first I saw nothing. Then I heard Cordiss call again and I saw him only a few yards from the last tongue of trees along the woods' edge. *He was crawling!*

I bolted forward. "Cordiss! You're injured?"

He raised himself up a bit and screamed at me. "Get back! Don't come an inch closer! They're right behind me—all around me!"

For a minute I merely stared, speechless and uncomprehending. I felt that my host might be going insane.

Then I saw them—huge black slugs, at least three feet in length, sliding out of the woods into the moonlight at appalling speed. One pair of lifted tentacles—the posterior—terminated in huge, glassy-looking eyes, alien and inimical. The anterior pair appeared to be sensory organs of some sort. As the creatures glided forward, they left a distinct track of slime which glistened in the moonlight.

Almost at once I understood why Cordiss was crawling. He had walked and then fallen, apparently, into one of these slime trails. Its effect was almost like that of glue. It covered his

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clothes; I was sure his boots were coated with it.

He reared partway up. There was suppressed panic and despair in his voice. "Dropped—rifle!" he gasped. "Get to the house. Gun room. Get—" He fell prone again and his pursuers were now only feet away, their monstrous globular eyes shining with a kind of quiet ferocity made all the more hideous because of its alien aspect.

I rushed back up the overgrown garden path, completely heedless of the wet branches which tore at my face. Dashing into the gun room, I lifted down a double-barreled shotgun, wrenched open a drawer, stuffed a box of shells into my jacket pocket and bolted out again.

As soon as I got back through the garden into the open I realized that I was too late. Cordiss lay motionless, literally covered by the huge black slugs. Tentacles lifted and half a dozen pairs of the glassy globular eyes turned in my direction.

Sobbing with frustration and horror, I rammed shells into the shotgun and blasted away at that obscene mound of crawling monstrosities. I knew that I was too late to save Cordiss—that, in fact, I might even be shortening his life by a few minutes with the roaring barrage of buckshot. But I felt convinced that I was acting as he would have preferred.

The shotgun blasts, lethal though they were, seemed to have only minimal effect upon those nightmare invaders from Long Hollow Swamp. The creatures' composition, their yielding viscosity, appeared to absorb the buckshot with only indifferent results. They were torn and rent and some of the gloating globular eyes were blasted into ragged tentacle stumps which oozed a kind of saffron ichor—yet the incredible creatures continued to move.

I was nearly out of shells when I noticed with a sudden surge of fear that while I had been firing away at the writhing mound of slugs which covered Cordiss, a number of others had begun to close in on my flanks. I saw instantly that within seconds I might be cut off.

Grasping the shotgun by the barrels so that I could swing it as a club if necessary, I whirled, ran back up the garden path, raced through the house and out to the garages which were situated in a wing off the front drive.

I don't know how I reached Colbury without killing myself; I drove like a maniac.

Within twenty minutes I was on the way back followed by three carloads of Colbury natives

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in various stages of dress and undress. Sheriff Wester and his deputy, Sam Kett, came in my car. The four cars, altogether, must have included a miniature arsenal.

There was no need of it. When we pushed through the rear garden into the open field adjacent to the nearby woods, there were no slugs in sight. Their gleaming, slime-covered trails led back into the trees. The dead or wounded ones had been either consumed or carried off.

What held us in horror, however, was not the sight of these slime-coated tracks. It was the bare skeleton of Cordiss, stripped of every fragment of flesh, sucked clean of every drop of blood, lying in the moonlight.

Sheriff Wester insisted on following the slime tracks for some distance into the woods, but we soon realized that it was a useless pursuit. There were no slugs in sight; the fearful creatures would be back in Long Hollow Swamp, burrowed deep in the mud, long before we could hope to reach the marsh which harbored the deadly things.

A search party organized early the next morning found nothing further. Tracks of swiftly fading slime led into the swamp and ended. The usual aura of waiting, listening expectancy hung over the area, but not a quiver of motion was visible. Cattail bogs, stands of switch grass and deep pools of muddy water lay silently.

Shortly after private obsequies for Cordiss' pitiful remains had been concluded, I learned to my great surprise that he had willed his estate to me. My first impulse was to sell it, but I changed my mind. Cordiss' death, I determined, must be avenged and the swamp horrors expunged.

Several leading scientists who specialized in the various orders of molluscoid families listened to my story with varying degrees of skepticism. They did indicate that the creatures I described resembled overdeveloped examples of the common black slug, *Arion ater*, in the sub-order Stylommatophora of the Pulmonata. One of them conceded that it was just *possible* that some heretofore unknown order of land mollusk, left undisturbed for centuries in good feeding grounds, might conceivably mutate into giantism. One suggested draining the swamp; another wanted to organize an expedition complete with oversized nets, grappling hooks, etc.

I decided on my own solution. Fred Malant, a devil-may-care friend of both the deceased Cordiss and myself, agreed to do the work. There were few things at

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which he hadn't tried his hand. He had done crop dusting with small aircraft and he knew a lot about incendiaries. The combination suited me perfectly.

We didn't bother with permits and the inevitable resultant tangle of red tape and delays.

One fine autumn day Fred flew back and forth over Long Hollow Swamp, liberally spraying every yard of it with some kind of highly inflammable preparation about whose composition he remained cheerfully but determinedly vague.

When the swamp was thoroughly saturated, Fred returned, tossing down a number of carefully timed incendiary "devices," as he called them.

Once the plane flew clear, after its final sweep, the whole of Long Hollow Swamp seemed to rise up in one great sheet of flame. The adjacent woods caught fire and the entire region, but particularly the swamp, burned furiously for three full days. Local volunteer firemen kept the woods fires under control, but nothing they could do had any effect on the roaring inferno which raged in Long Hollow Swamp.

The stench which arose from the swamp was beyond description. It hung in the air for weeks.

Arrested for arson, I put up bond, turned the matter over to my attorney and shrugged. Long Hollow Swamp was a burned-out socket of dried mud and charred vegetation.

Sometime later I moved into Cordiss' house. I have visited the site of the swamp many times since, but I have never seen a single slug of any size, nor any tracks of slime.

Only recently I noticed a deer nibbling some grass only a short distance from the former marsh.

Even when all the circumstances were explained in court, I paid a stiff fine for setting fire to woodlands and for "willfully concealing the identity of an accomplice," but I didn't care.

Never again will those tentacled horrors come gliding in their glistening tracks of slime from Long Hollow Swamp.

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The only one of anything may be of the utmost consequence to the owner.

Blue-coveralled baggage handlers pulled trunks and suitcases from the bowels of the Boeing 747, stacked them high on a stake-body truck, and sped across the asphalt to the distant terminal building. Inside, the tons of luggage were deposited onto a long, rapidly-moving conveyer belt for delivery to passengers waiting on the level above.

The apparatus was old and the load a particularly weighty one. A support bracket jerked free of the ceiling, and the conveyer twisted slightly like a restless snake. A top-heavy trunk fell onto its side, jamming the narrow opening through which the belt passed. Baggage backed up, and several pieces plunged to the concrete floor far below before one of the attendants could rush to shut off the machinery.

It was a minor accident that was quickly repaired. Within minutes the luggage was on its way again in an unbroken stream. Only then was attention turned to the pieces that had fallen. Six were sturdy suitcases which, when shaken vigorously by a tall, burly baggage handler, made no ominous, broken-glass sounds. They were returned to the conveyer and allowed to continue their journey to the baggage counter above.

It was a different story, however, with the last case. One aluminum corner was badly crushed, and at least one of the other bags had landed squarely on

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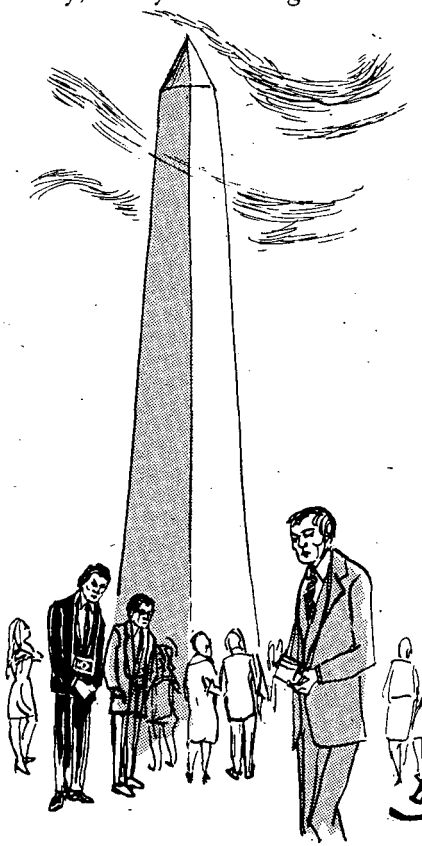
top of it, putting a deep dent in its polished side. When the case was lifted, it sounded like a tin can filled with loose pebbles.

"Hey, Harry!" the huge attendant called to his supervisor. "I t'ink we busted sump'n here."



The supervisor took the case from him and carried it to a scarred wooden table. He unsnapped the catches, and a number of baggage handlers gathered around to look over his shoulders like curious children. When he raised the lid, it turned out it wasn't a suitcase at all but some kind of complicated electronic instrument. A panel covered with dials, knobs, switches, and gauges was revealed. Ten seconds later, while everyone was staring at it, wondering what it was, it exploded, scattering bloody pieces of the workmen in every direction.

The Director of the Bureau was sitting in his fifth-floor office, examining a thick personnel file, when Mr. Merrill was announced. He told his secretary to send Merrill in, then came from behind his mahogany desk to shake hands with his visitor. Merrill was the head of a rival agency, and the Director didn't feel particularly close to him; but he had read somewhere that it is bad psychology to greet people over the top of a desk unless you are trying to intimidate them. He needed Merrill.

by A. F. Oreshnik

"Did you find someone suitable?" Merrill asked. He was tall

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and thin, and his white, closely cropped hair would have gone better with the general's uniform he had worn for years than the anonymous gray business suit he now favored.

"Well . . . yes," the Director said, reluctantly. "We have a man who might be able to pull it off, but he's hardly someone I would select if I had a choice. I still wish you'd lend me a few of your people."

"You know I can't do that. Our charter prevents us from operating inside the United States."

"You haven't always been this fussy."

"True, but times have changed. I can't risk adverse publicity, no matter how slight the risk may be. I wouldn't want to wake up some morning and find I no longer have an agency."

The Director returned to his seat behind the desk, and Merrill took the chair in front of it. Merrill crossed his legs and leaned back. "You said you have someone?"

"Yes, Special Agent Walter Penny," he said. Then he added a bit distastefully, "He's a Resident Agent."

"What does that mean?" Merrill asked.

"We have Field Offices in all the major cities, as you know, but we also have Resident Agencies scattered across the country too. They're needed to fill in the gaps, so to speak. Some of them have several agents assigned to them; others are quite small. Agent Penny has run a one-man agency north of Tucumcari, New Mexico for the past twenty-odd years. If it weren't for the retraining we require at Quantico every two years, most Resident Agents would probably forget to strap on their pistols in the morning. It's not the most active life. Their case-loads aren't a fraction of the size of those handled by the Field Offices."

"Tell me about the man," Merrill said.

The Director pulled his chair closer to the desk and opened the personnel file. "Special Agent Walter Francis Penny was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on April 8th, 1927," he recited. "Both his parents and his grandparents were native-born citizens. He was initially employed by the Bureau as a tour guide, taking visitors through the public areas of the building, explaining the displays, and answering questions. That was in 1947 while he was attending Georgetown University Law School. When he received his degree, he applied for appointment as a Special Agent and attended

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our academy at Quantico, Virginia. He was issued his gold badge and credentials in 1949 and assigned to the Los Angeles Field Office. In late 1950, he requested and was granted leave of absence to join the Army."

"What about the language proficiency?" Merrill asked.

"I'm getting to that. He served in Korea first, and then was stationed in Japan. Er . . . his wife is Japanese. A native of Osaka."

Merrill put his feet flat on the floor and sat straighter. "How did *that* happen?" he asked incredulously.

"She was working for the U.S. Army, and—"

"You know what I mean," Merrill broke in. "How did he get reappointed to the Bureau despite having a foreign-born wife? There may not be a law against it, but it's certainly contrary to your policy."

The Director held his hands out, palms up, and shrugged. "I wasn't the Director at the time, but it's obvious somebody goofed badly."

"Well, you're here now, and you have as much control over your agency as I have over mine. Why didn't you simply get rid of him?"

"Because I *don't* have as much control as you do. He went into the service, remember? He didn't hide out in the Bureau to avoid military service as so many others have done. If I fired him without cause, he'd have the veteran's right to appeal to the Civil Service."

"Ah, yes," Merrill said with a touch of sarcasm. He leaned back and crossed his legs again. "Never do anything that might embarrass the Bureau. I almost forgot the concern you people have for your public image." He seemed to think for a moment, then he laughed. "So *that's* why he's a Resident Agent—out of sight, out of mind."

The Director smiled weakly. "Something like that."

"But he *does* know the language?"

"Yes, he speaks fluent Japanese. His wife and family speak it at home, and every couple of years he and his wife and their two sons spend his accrued leave time in Japan, visiting his wife's relatives there."

"What does he look like?" Merrill asked.

"Like a big farmer," the Director said, producing a full-length photo. "Six foot, sandy hair going gray, a ruddy complexion, and he's about twenty pounds over the Bureau's weight guidelines. He doesn't have any waist at all."

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"Sounds all right. When can you have him in Washington?"

"He's on the way. As soon as the computer turned him up, I ran a location check on him. It turned out he was at the academy at Quantico, taking his two-week refresher. A chopper will be dropping him on the roof any time now."

When he received word that he was to report to the Bureau's Washington headquarters immediately, and that a helicopter was being put at his disposal for the trip, Special Agent Walter Penny wondered which of his recent peccadilloes had been discovered. It was possible someone had found out that he had lent the Bureau's four-wheel-drive pickup truck to his neighbor the previous week. That was a no-no. Or perhaps it was something more recent, like signing out to go to the movies on the Marine base last night and having a few beers at the Officers' Club instead. He had been called onto the carpet for less. It seemed as though every Inspector in the Bureau was out to get him. There wasn't anything they would have liked better than to find enough substantive errors in one of his investigations to justify his dismissal.

Now that he was able to retire—he was old enough and had been with the Bureau long enough—the only thing that kept him from doing so was the irritation he was causing the people who had tried to make life miserable for him. He had no hope of being promoted. He was a GS-13, the highest pay grade for an investigative agent, and that was as high as he could ever hope to go.

Did he care? He had to admit he didn't. Being relegated to a one-man Resident Agency had been, next to meeting his wife Mariko, the most fortunate thing that had happened to him. If the Bureau hadn't seen fit to push him into a corner, he might have been in the same rat race with all the other Special Agents. He could imagine himself being transferred from Field Office to Field Office every few years, too busy chasing promotion and recognition to have time for Mariko and the boys, and the thought repelled him. It had been very close.

So, instead of being afraid that the Bureau might be angry at him, Agent Penny found himself worrying that it might no longer be. Penny didn't want anything to change. He liked the small ranch he had. The neighbors were friendly, and there were many different races and ethnic groups living harmoniously in the area. It was a good place to live. His boys

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hadn't been faced with the kind of prejudice they might have met in a large city.

In fact, they had been subjected to injustice only once, and that was when they were in their teens. It had been a mistake, of course. Everyone connected with it had been quick to tell Penny it had been a mistake.

Tadashi and Kenji—Tad and Ken, he called them—decided to take their jalopy out for a spin. At midnight they still hadn't returned. Then the phone rang and Penny was told they had been arrested for speeding in the next county, and the deputy who had stopped them had locked them up. They didn't have enough money with them to pay a fine or post bond.

Penny drove over to the Sheriff's office. Their paths had crossed many times over the years, but the Sheriff hadn't connected Penny with the boys. Who would expect a big, fair-haired federal agent to be the father of a pair of slightly built, black-haired teenagers who looked like Indians or Mexicans?

"Your kids? Here?" the Sheriff said when Penny told him he'd come to pick them up.

"Yes. A pair of dangerous speeders. One of your men just called my house to let me know where they were," he explained.

"This is just a mistake, Penny. Why didn't they identify themselves as your kids?"

Penny smiled. "Probably didn't think it would make any difference. Don't worry about it; it'll be a good lesson for them. It'll be a long time before they do any more speeding."

The Sheriff liked Penny. He didn't try to throw his weight around, and he wasn't a glory hound.

The Sheriff stood up to lead the way into the jail. Suddenly he blanched and struck his forehead with the heel of his hand.

"What's the matter?" Penny asked.

"I don't know how to tell you this."

Penny's smile slipped away. "Tell me what?"

"Reed made the arrests."

Deputy Reed had a reputation for being a little too free with his hands. Like all bullies, he picked his victims carefully. They were never from that county, and they were never Caucasian. Tad and Ken would have suited him perfectly.

Penny's jaw tightened. When he spoke, all friendliness was gone from his tone. "You'd best get those boys out here, Sheriff."

The Sheriff hurried away and

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returned a few minutes later with Tad and Ken. Tad's T-shirt was torn, and he had a split lip that was beginning to swell. Ken had a cut above one eye and was holding a piece of tissue against it. The boys stood quietly, neither crying nor complaining. They were only sixteen and seventeen, but no two-bit sadist was going to break their spirits. Penny felt very proud of them.

"You boys go home," Penny said. "Your mother is worried about you." They started to turn and he added, "Better stop at the gas station on the highway and try to clean up a little. No sense letting her see you looking like this, right?"

The boys nodded and filed out.

"Where's Reed?" Penny asked the Sheriff.

"He's off duty."

"Call him. Get him down here."

"Look, Penny, I'm sorry as hell about what happened, but it was a mistake. I don't want you to do anything crazy over it."

"No, you look. Get that man down here. If I have to go looking for him, I'm not going to be any happier when I find him."

The Sheriff made a phone call and Reed arrived fifteen minutes later. When Reed was told who Tad and Ken were, he swallowed hard. "I made a mistake," he told Penny, almost stammering it out.

"Yes," Penny agreed in a deceptively mild tone. "You did. Don't make another one."

"I won't," Reed said, obviously relieved and a little surprised to be getting off as lightly as it seemed.

"For instance," Penny continued, "don't make the mistake of staying around this part of the world. They're looking for policemen in Los Angeles and Chicago and a dozen other cities. Distant cities. The more I think about what happened tonight, the more angry I'm going to get. In a couple of weeks, if you haven't made yourself disappear, I'm going to do my best to *make* you disappear."

"Hey! You can't—" Reed began.

"The hell I can't," Penny said. "I've told you how it is. If you're too stupid to listen, that's going to be your problem."

Penny walked abruptly out of the Sheriff's private office, passed the deputies manning the switchboard and desk, and went out the side door to the gravel-covered parking lot. The Sheriff caught up with him there.

"I know you're upset, Penny, but I can't have you threatening my deputies."

"Sheriff, I'm willing to let this end with Reed." Penny climbed

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into his car and slammed the door. "But I know who it was that pinned the badge on him, and who's been closing his eyes to Reed's mistreatment of prisoners. If you don't want a piece of this, you better stay out of it!"

Penny drove out of the parking lot, leaving the openmouthed Sheriff to stare after him. Ten days later, Reed packed his young wife into their car and moved to Los Angeles.

Now Tadashi was a social worker in San Francisco with a new bride, and Kenji had another year at Georgetown before he'd have his law degree. Walter Penny and Mariko were content living in New Mexico. He decided that he'd retire before he'd accept a transfer—if that was what the summons to Washington was about.

The helicopter that had picked him up at Quantico was a small, three-place craft with a plexiglass bubble that allowed an unobstructed view of the ground below. When the pilot was over the Arlington National Cemetery, he called the Washington Defense Command on a special frequency and identified himself so they wouldn't run into an unpleasant surprise in the sky above D.C. That done, he turned east on a course paralleling Constitution Avenue. He hovered above Bureau Headquarters between 9th and 10th Streets, and then dropped lightly to the heliport on its roof.

Penny climbed out, ducking his head to avoid the idling rotor. He knew there was over two feet of clearance, but there was something about those spinning silver blades that made him extra cautious, even respectful.

As soon as Penny was away from the machine, the main rotor picked up speed and the machine lifted off. The door to the building opened and Penny was motioned inside by a man wearing a single-breasted business suit and a subdued necktie, the Bureau uniform. "Special Agent Penny?" he asked, looking pointedly at Penny's sport shirt and string tie.

"Yes," Penny answered.

"Inspector Boyle," the man introduced himself, offering his hand. "The Director is waiting for you in his office."

Boyle guided Penny to the reception room outside the Director's office and left him with a taciturn young Agent who acted as the Director's doorman. A few seconds later a buzzer signaled the release of the door latch, and Penny was allowed to pass.

Penny hadn't been inside the Director's office since the day he

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had filed through with the rest of his graduating class from the academy. That had been over twenty years before, but it must have made a deep impression. He immediately noticed that the pictures on the walls were now bright flashes of abstract color, and that the mahogany desk carried only a silver penholder and blotter frame. Penny wondered what clue these might offer to the personality of the man behind the desk, but couldn't come up with anything.

He was surprised to find he wasn't alone with the Director. His surprise deepened when Merrill turned sideways and Penny could see more of him than the back of his closely cropped white head. He knew who Merrill was, and his presence made Penny apprehensive.

The Director got right to business, leaving Penny standing. "You've read about the bomb that went off at Washington National yesterday?"

"In the baggage room?"

"Of course, 'In the baggage room.' There was no other."

"Yes, sir," Penny said.

"Six men died outright, two died within hours, and three more are on the critical list at Arlington Hospital. The lab men got on this right away and came up with something interesting. The baggage handlers weren't killed by a bomb in the usual sense. They were killed by a booby trap. As they reconstruct it, the device was fitted into a thirty-inch by twenty-four-inch by eight-inch polished aluminum case. There was a lid and under that a dummy faceplate covered with phony dials, knobs, and switches. The whole thing was designed to look like a piece of highly expensive electronic test equipment, but it had no function except to provide a hiding place for contraband."

The Director paused, and Penny took the cue. "What kind of contraband?" he asked.

"The compartment was large enough to hold almost anything someone might want to sneak past customs or airport security. It was a very complex- and formidable-appearing instrument. No one would have tried to take it apart unless he had more to go on than mere suspicion or a hunch. But if he did, there was the booby trap waiting for him. It was set to go off if anyone tried to dismantle the case. We estimate the charge contained a five-kilogram block of TNT."

Penny did some quick mental arithmetic. "Eleven pounds—that's pretty extreme."

Merrill spoke up for the first

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time. "That's what we're dealing with—extremists. The explosive wasn't all that case contained. There was also a nine-millimeter submachine gun with a dozen fully loaded magazines. They could easily be removed once the case reached its final destination and used in any number of lethal ways. The weapon and TNT together, and the manner in which they were transported, make it certain someone had a particularly nasty plan in the works."

"We may never know why the baggage handlers were tampering with that case," the Director said, "but we *do* know a few other things. The handle of the case was found intact, and the claim tag was still attached to it." He turned to Merrill. "Tell him the rest."

"The girl at the ticket counter in L.A. must have been impressed by the case because she wrote the owner's name and flight number on the back of the claim tag as an added precaution against loss. Once we had his name—Hiroshi Kinoshita—it was a simple matter to locate his ticket. And that's when we got our break. It turned out it had been paid for with a credit card. What's more, it had been purchased in Tokyo. A quick inquiry with the credit card people turned up something else—the same card had been used to pay for three one-way tickets from Tokyo to Honolulu, three one-way tickets from Hawaii to various locations on the mainland, and three one-way tickets from those points to Washington, D.C. The tickets were purchased at different times from several widely separated airline offices and travel agencies in what seems to have been an effort to disguise the final destination."

Merrill continued: "The last ticket was used this morning. A man named Kaneto Shaguri flew from Seattle to Washington National. Bureau agents were on the plane with him and there were more waiting when he landed. His luggage consisted of a briefcase which he kept with him on the flight and an aluminum case that appeared to be identical with the one that exploded the day before."

"What do you mean, 'appeared to be identical'? Wasn't he picked up?" Penny asked.

"That's exactly what I wanted to do," the Director said, giving Merrill an accusing look, "but Mr. Merrill talked me out of it."

"Let me tell you about terrorists," Merrill said. "Fifty and a hundred years ago, they attacked political leaders almost exclusively. Today, though assassina-

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tions continue to take place, the main thrust of terrorist activity isn't toward individuals. They use their violence to illustrate the impotence of a particular government to control them, or to focus world attention on their cause. It's this propaganda by terror that has been increasing, and it's the hardest to defend against. Look at the millions we spend to make our commercial flights secure, and those men are still transporting weapons and explosives at will."

Merrill patted his pockets until he found a silver cigarette case. He took it out, removed a cigarette, broke it in half, and returned one piece to the case before sliding it back into his pocket. "I'm trying to cut down," he explained, then lit the frayed end of the short length and inhaled deeply before continuing his lecture. "One thing all terrorists, except the ones who plant bombs with delayed fuses, have in common is that they are prepared to die. In fact, they *expect* to die. Only an idiot would think he could fire a dozen magazines from a submachine gun and not look up to find himself surrounded by a ring of police. They sincerely believe their cause, whatever it may be, is worth dying for. And these men have shown that they aren't fools. Their method of concealing the weapon and TNT took brains. Also, they bought one-way tickets, so they don't plan on leaving here."

The Director cleared his throat. "This is the way it stands right now, Agent Penny: we know that the first set of tickets were used four days ago, but we haven't located the man who used them. We did follow Kaneto Shaguri from the airport to an old building on 1st Street Southwest. We took a picture of the man who answered the door for him and wired it to L.A. The girl at the airline there identified the man as Hiroshi Kinoshita, the one whose case exploded. The third man may be living there, too, but we don't know. There may be more than three men involved; we don't know that, either. We don't know what they plan to do or when they plan to do it. And we have no idea what it is designed to accomplish for them."

"In fact," Merrill offered, "there's a good chance whatever they plan to do isn't for themselves. You'll recall it was Japanese terrorists who machine-gunned the tourists at that airport in Israel a few years ago, and there is some suspicion that many of the terrorist bombs placed in Northern Ireland were the product of Middle Eastern technical advisors.

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Whenever terrorist groups are afraid they are being watched too closely, they have been exchanging suicide squads. This way they have the added advantage of presenting their attack from a totally unexpected direction."

Penny stood up abruptly. "What do you want from me?"

"Don't act stupid, Penny. You know very well what is wanted of you. Inspector Boyle is waiting in the outer office to help you get started. Stop at my secretary's desk on your way past to sign a resignation form and leave your badge and credentials." He paused significantly, then added, "Just in case."

"Yes, sir," Penny said past tight lips. "Just in case."

Merrill and the Director watched him leave. When the door closed behind him, Merrill was the first to speak. "When this is over, will you give him back his credentials?"

"Not a chance," the Director said. "One good thing is going to come out of this, even if it's only that I get that oaf out of the Bureau. You didn't think I'd pass up an opportunity like this, did you?"

"No," Merrill admitted. "I didn't."

Later that afternoon, Kinoshita and Shaguri, each with a camera around his neck, took a taxi to 15th Street and Constitution Avenue. They were small men, below medium height. Neither spoke English; they had presented the driver with the address typed on a card. From there they walked across the wide expanse of open lawn to the base of the Washington Monument. After a five-minute wait, they were joined by a third man, also Oriental. Together, they got in line with a group of tourists and took the elevator to the observation deck at the top of the tall, marble shaft.

Penny was on the elevator with them and moved from window to window behind them as they looked out in all four directions. They remained at the top of the monument, chattering animatedly, for over half an hour. Penny pretended to be having trouble with his camera and stayed with them. Then, when they turned to take the stairway to the bottom, he descended in the elevator.

Inspector Boyle and a pair of female Special Agents were waiting for him. "What are they doing?" Boyle asked.

"Coming down the steps," Penny answered, taking him by the arm and leading him away from the women.

"Just like tourists," Boyle observed.

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"Not quite. They aren't counting the steps—they're looking for the best spots to place charges," Penny said.

"And at the top?"

"They discussed fields of fire. They decided they could probably hit anything they could see, and they could see just about everything, including the White House, the Capitol Building, and Bureau Headquarters. They plan to hold their little party on Sunday afternoon."

They turned and started back toward the woman agents.

"That's when tourist traffic is at its peak," Boyle said. "We should grab them right now."

"That won't tell us what this is all about. Just stay with them. They plan to go somewhere to eat, and then they'll probably split up. That would be the smart thing for them to do. If they don't all return to 1st Street, find out where they do go. By the way, the third one is named Mitsuki, and he told them he was educated in this country. He's the backbone of the team."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take a look inside the building on 1st Street Southwest," Penny said.

"In that case, you're on your own from this point," Boyle told him.

"Yeah," Penny replied. "That's what I figured."

The building on 1st Street Southwest was one of an entire block that was going to be leveled for urban renewal. Many of the structures had already been condemned and stood with windows and doors boarded over to keep children and derelicts out. The one where the terrorists were staying was the only occupied building on the block. It looked little better than the others except its windows weren't broken.

Penny went directly to the front door and rang the bell. He stood for several minutes with his finger on the button, listening to the faint ring inside. When he was satisfied that there was no one home or, at least, no one intended to answer, he followed a narrow alley to the rear and let himself inside by simply kicking the door in.

He rushed quickly from room to room through the silent building with his pistol in his fist. As soon as he was certain the first floor was vacant, he took the steps to the second floor two at a time and checked each room there. By the time he reached the third floor, he was breathing heavily and a film of sweat had broken out on his forehead.

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The building was empty, so he returned to the first floor. On the way, he picked up the two aluminum cases he had discovered in a second-floor bedroom. He set them on the kitchen table near the rear door and opened them. The booby traps had been disconnected, and the knob- and dial-covered faceplate unbolted. One case contained a nine-millimeter submachine gun, loaded magazines, and a block of high explosive with several detonators. The second case contained another block of explosive along with a dismantled high-powered rifle, telescopic sight, and several hundred rounds of ammunition for it.

Penny closed the cases and put them out of sight in the bottom of the kitchen cabinets. Then he went to the front door, opened it from the inside, stuffed a few small pieces of paper deep into the lock's keyway, and closed the door again.

Now all that was left was to wait. It was a couple of hours before he heard the terrorists at the front door, trying to fit their key into the lock. Finally, one of them told Kinoshita to go around the side of the building and look for an open window. He found one halfway down the alley, and he found the butt of Penny's gun behind his left ear when he was halfway through the window. Penny pulled him the rest of the way inside and tied him up with strips of bed sheet.

After a few minutes, Shaguri came looking for Kinoshita and Penny got him in the same way. Then he went to the front door, opened it, and knocked the impatient Mitsuki senseless as he rushed inside.

Penny carried all three men to the rear of the basement and tied their wrists to an overhead water pipe. The floor was littered with old packing materials, and the air smelled both dusty and damp at the same time. A bare 150-watt bulb was screwed into a fixture on a rough beam. They were still unconscious, so he left them and returned to the first floor. He telephoned the Bureau and had the operator patch him through to Inspector Boyle in his car.

"Everything's under control," he told Boyle. "You can send everyone home."

When he returned to the basement, Mitsuki was awake and struggling to free himself. The other two were just beginning to stir. The glare from the bare bulb made their shadows stretch across the cluttered floor. Penny sat on an upended wooden crate where he had a good view of them and

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for a time he didn't say anything.

"What do you want? Are you a thief?" Mitsuki demanded in English.

"I want to know who you represent and what you hoped to accomplish at the Washington Monument," Penny answered, also in English.

Mitsuki's eyes widened in surprise, then he said, "I demand an attorney. There are rules, you know!"

Penny shook his head almost sadly. "For you there is only one rule and that is that there are *no* rules. There will be no lawyers, no charges filed, no public trial. You three have been dead men from the moment I brought you down here."

"We are not afraid of death," Mitsuki snorted contemptuously. "Our cause is a just one."

Penny rubbed his eyes and stood up. "There are a lot of ways of dying," he said. The other two were fully conscious now, listening without comprehension to the conversation. Penny drew his pistol, aimed at the center of Mitsuki's forehead, and pulled the trigger. Then he promised the other two in perfect Japanese that they would be allowed to join their friend as soon as all of Penny's questions were answered.

An hour later, Penny left the building, carrying the aluminum cases. He paused on a corner two blocks north to set the cases down and glance at his watch. There was a dull thump, like someone beating a rug, and he looked back to see the entire block he'd left erupt into flame. By the time the firemen arrived, there wouldn't be much to save, not that they'd try very hard in that condemned area.

Penny picked up the cases and started walking wearily toward M Street. He was thinking about the report he had to write and wondering whether he should demand the return of his credentials first. He knew that was probably the only way he could get them.

Finally he decided it didn't matter. He had completed his last assignment, it was time he retired, and the decision was his, not the Director's.

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One's picture may be altered considerably by double exposure.

Your Money or Your Wife

by W. S. Noyes

Make a mistake in business," muttered Joe Solomon, "and you fix it fast. So maybe there's a dip in profits the next quarter. But do nothing, and everything's lost."

Solomon studied the picture of his wife on his desk. She was a mistake, a big one. Ten years already—and with her good health there was no telling how much longer.

He rose from his desk and paced the expensive carpet of his office.

Smart thing would be to get rid of her, legally, if possible, but he wasn't dumb enough to come out and ask for a divorce. If she knew

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that's what he wanted, she'd take him for every cent she could, which was plenty; and the way business was now, he couldn't afford liquidating any of his holdings.

"Liquidating?" he spoke the word aloud.

That was an interesting word. Had a good sound, even a nice taste on the tongue.

Irene *liquidated.*

In his mind's eye he saw her turn to wax and melt like a candle, her bleached hair first, then her ugly fat face and leering, sarcastic smile, and last but certainly not least, her lumpy figure. A shapeless puddle remained.

He looked out the office window, then started pacing the floor again.

That was a fine vision, poetic even—but wives didn't liquefy regardless of how picky and crabby they were. Irene was here to stay, unless . . .

There were professionals who handled such problems, for a fee.

His imagination took flight again: a man in a dark suit carrying over his shoulder a golf bag in which was tucked, between wedge and putter, a sawed-off shotgun. He caught up with Irene in a bunker at the club. She was kicking her ball out of the sand.

Boom! That'd teach her to cheat! She'd stop kicking at once.

He smiled, then frowned.

Let a stranger blast Irene, or run her down, or dispose of her in any manner, and the police would beat a path straight to his door. After all, she was *his* wife. He'd be the prime suspect.

Besides, doing business with hired killers was dangerous. At least he imagined it was. You paid them cash and they did the job. But what was to stop them from blackmail? Sure, they'd work it around so *they* would end up owning his business, and he'd be worse off than he was now.

His secretary's voice sounded on the intercom. "Mr. Solomon, Mr. Fishbeck is here."

Already? He checked his watch. Irene was causing him to waste time, and time was money!

Fishbeck came in bowing and scraping, as usual, as though he were a beggar rather than a dealer in precious metals.

"A truly beautiful, a magnificent day," he said in his groaning voice.

"That much I know," said Solomon, pointing to a chair. "How's Zurich?"

Fishbeck did not remove his overcoat. He lowered his skinny form onto the chair, took off his hat, and groaned again, "Good and bad."

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"What's good and what's bad?"

"The market's up."

"Good."

Fishbeck held up his hand, thumb and forefinger almost touching. "But only a little."

"Up is up!" exclaimed Solomon.

"If you have millions, a little is enough. But for us?"

Solomon eyed Fishbeck. Buying gold on the side was a good idea, things being what they were; and Fishbeck, for all his groaning and moaning, was plenty smart. Had contacts. Knew who to bribe and how much to pay. But he was such a schlemiel! Between him and Irene it was a wonder he hadn't lost his sanity.

"Coins are coming into their own," Fishbeck announced.

"Their own? Coins are always good. They're something you can hold in your hand."

Fishbeck smiled, or did he grimace in pain? On his face it was all one. "Not coins as such. Antique coins. Rare coins."

Solomon listened. As a kid he'd collected stamps and coins. Still had the stamps. Worthless—but it was fun pretending they were of value. He spent the coins.

Fishbeck said, "We buy only gold, of course, so if interest declines, we still got bullion, follow?"

Solomon nodded.

"If you're interested I can get together a nice package. Of course, you have to be careful."

"Careful how?"

Fishbeck leaned toward him, his watery eyes showing a pale, yellowish light. "Thieves! There are those who would use any means, besides buying, to get their hands on such rare and beautiful objects. Coins are small, remember. Unlike bullion, their value is not in direct proportion to weight." He paused and licked his greedy lips. "Did you hear what happened to Kruger?"

"Waldo Kruger?"

"The same. Masked men burst into his home and forced him to open his safe and hand over his collection. Terrible!"

Waldo Kruger was a tough cookie in a business deal, Solomon knew firsthand. He asked, "How'd they make Waldo give them up?"

"Torture, violence. They beat him."

Solomon shook his head. "I didn't figure Kruger would crack that easy."

"Who said he cracked? He capitulated when they threatened his wife."

"Wife?"

"Certainly. A dirty trick, but effective. First, they put a revolver to her head and fired it just past her ear. Next, the scum aimed it

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between her eyes and started counting. Kruger had until ten to make his choice. It's said he held out to eight."

As Fishbeck spoke, Solomon translated his words into pictures. He was in Waldo Kruger's home. He saw the masked men, the pistol, the wife. It was a very interesting scene, yes.

However, there were also problems.

"Why did Kruger keep such treasure at home? A bank vault would be much safer."

"True," Fishbeck said. "But then you have not collected gold coins." He put out a trembling hand, the damp palm up. "Such precious objects must be held, they must be in contact with the owner's flesh! That is the pleasure, the joy, of having them. To know that any time you choose you can treat yourself alone, *alone,* to them! Ah."

"Perhaps," said Solomon. "But why didn't the robbers wait till Kruger was out and then open the safe themselves? Be less danger for them that way, don't you think?"

"One does not take chances unless to avoid greater chances."

"Explain."

"You know very little of safes, I presume. At best they are a delaying tactic. Their chief purpose is fire protection. But assuming Kruger's safe to be the best made, do you suppose the thieves would risk destroying its precious contents by blowing it open? That would be folly!"

Again Solomon's mind formed images. He heard the explosion, saw the safe door fly off. After the smoke cleared, he looked into the dark recess and spotted several lumps of gold. The coins were liquidated.

"So what is your wish?" Fishbeck asked. "Are you interested?"

Solomon smiled. He had to make a conscious effort to refrain from laughing with joy. "I'm extremely interested. But I want something nice, something truly unique, understand?"

"Certainly. But as you know, the difference between the ordinary and the unique is price. How much do you wish to invest?"

Enough to attract attention, he almost replied. "I want beauty, singularity, value. A hundred thousand, to begin."

Fishbeck raised an eyebrow. "That will secure a few nice pieces."

"Your commission I'll pay over and above." He smiled. "Make it fifteen percent this time, instead of the usual ten."

Fishbeck struggled to his feet and bowed. "You are too kind, too generous."

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"Nonsense. Happiness is a rare commodity these days, and well worth a bonus."

"Collecting is indeed a great joy. But one must be careful, remember."

Solomon guided him to the door and out into the reception area. "I intend to be very careful," he said.

The safe in his apartment was little more than a strongbox. He called a reputable firm specializing in maximum security for priceless objects. Money, he assured the manager, was of no consequence. Still, he was more than a little surprised when he received a bill for $3500.00 for the small safe they installed in, of all places, the kitchen, behind a false wall oven. The door was secured by the usual dial and tumblers; but even if one had the correct combination, he couldn't open it unless he also had a small electronic box which activated a second bolt.

Solomon didn't understand the complexities of his new safe. He politely nodded as the manager tried explaining them to him, and he agreed to the added expense of fifty a month for tying into a central alarm system.

"Most of our clients pay this by the year," the manager explained. "Shall I make out a receipt for six hundred, or for a shorter period?"

Solomon thought. Another year with Irene? No! "Let's try it for six months," he said.

Now he had to contend with Irene.

"So why the new safe?" she asked, in her best sarcastic manner. "You got nothing, but nothing, worth stealing."

He tried to be nice. "You can never tell, sweetheart. A man changes."

"*Shortchanges.* You're up to something." She flashed an evil grin. "Dipping in the till? Squirreling away cash to beat the IRS? Well, forget it! I'll turn you in for the ten percent bounty."

She would, too, he realized. She'd do it for five percent; for nothing, maybe. He gritted his teeth and said, "You're looking at a new man, dear. In a couple of days we'll have something to lock in that safe, something that'll make them put our names in the paper."

She frowned. He could see the wheels turning behind her eyes. Angles, she was figuring them.

"Like what, somebody's head?"

"Very funny. But just wait and you'll see. I swear you'll be happy."

"That's a lot to swear, 'cause it'll be the first time in ten years

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I've been happy." She shook her finger under his nose. "You're up to something, Joe, as usual."

So she suspected, so what? She always suspected. She thought she had him figured out. Maybe she did, to a point, but he wasn't too old to shift around a little.

The more curious Irene became the more she would unwittingly help his plan. He was counting on her so-called social contacts and her big mouth for publicity.

He might even install another phone for her—she'd need it—but that could wait till later.

Fishbeck said a week, ten days and he'd have the coins. Six days were gone already and he hadn't yet faced the one possibility that worried him most: would he be able to bear the pain the thieves would inflict when they tried to make him reveal the combination? He couldn't give in, not right away. He'd have to endure whatever they did to him, so that they'd quit and start on Irene.

He didn't like thinking about pain. Dentists terrified him. What if they tied him up and threatened to yank his teeth with a pair of household pliers? What if behind their masks they were Orientals and in their pockets were bamboo shoots to be driven underneath fingernails and set afire? What if . . .

He couldn't sleep. It was an act of courage merely to smile at Irene. She saw he was nervous, she scented it like a shark does blood and swam in for the kill.

"In trouble, huh? I knew it. That safe is proof positive. Ha-ha-ha! I always knew you'd end up behind bars!"

To hell with the plan! Bare hands would do just as well. No court in the land would convict him for killing a bug like Irene!

On second thought, juries were unpredictable, and he wanted to appear heroic. Yes, afterwards they would say, "He did his best. He stood up to them. Look at his broken bones, his battered face, his missing teeth and burned fingernails . . ."

Solomon groaned, reminding himself of Fishbeck.

He had to test his threshold of pain. He had a double Scotch and went to the garage and found a hammer. He put his hand on the workbench, closed his eyes and tried to hit it. At the last possible moment his hand jumped aside and the hammer struck wood, making a horrible thump.

He tried again, with the same result. Maybe if he tied it down or clamped it in a vise?

He looked at the hammer, then at his hand. There had to be a better way. Those guys would use

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fists, not hammers. There were gyms downtown where pro boxers worked out. For a couple of bucks they'd spar with anyone. So he found a gym and told the manager what he wanted.

The fellow stared at him and said, "You some kind of pain freak?"

"A what?"

"A hit-me-hard-I-love-it nut?"

Solomon explained: times were bad, a person should be able to defend himself. Boxing was the manly art of—

The manager waved his cigar in his face. "You want protection, buy a dog or a gun, or buy one of each. Beat it!"

On the way back to his office he tried stumping his toes. His Italian shoes were made of supple leather. He never dreamed it was so tough to do. Or could it be that he was able to bear more pain than he supposed? Maybe living all these years with Irene had dulled his awareness of hurt.

Fishbeck brought the coins to his office in a small leather bag.

As he prepared to show them to Solomon, he went through a sort of ritual. First, he spread a piece of black velvet on the desk. Next, he adjusted the light just so. Finally, he stepped back and looked both ways, like he was getting ready to dash across a busy street.

He took each coin from the bag very carefully and gently placed it on the velvet, at the same time humming a tune.

"Lovely, aren't they lovely?" Fishbeck said, when twenty circles of gold were arranged on the black background.

They were nice. Solomon said, "Yeah, very pretty. But is that all I get for a hundred thou?"

"All?" Fishbeck was shocked. He pointed from coin to coin, telling what each was. There were Sovereigns, Zlotys, Rands, Reals, Eagles and Double Eagles.

"All right," said Solomon, "I'm impressed. But shouldn't they be in a case?"

"For what? Surely you don't intend to display them?"

Solomon picked up a Double Eagle. It was heavy and warm. Its butter color made him wet his lips. "Yeah, I'm going to show them off," he said. "What's the use of having something unique if you can't make people eat their hearts out?"

Fishbeck threw his hands to his head and yanked what little hair he possessed.

Solomon called the insurance company and protected his investment. Then he contacted a repu-

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table jeweler who sent over a trusted employee with a number of lined trays suitable for exhibiting coins. He chose two elegant ones, paid the man with a check, then slipped the bag of coins and the trays into his briefcase and went home.

Irene wasn't there. He called her name, looked through the rooms. No note, but why should there be? She did her thing and he did his. She was still asleep when he left in the mornings. When he came home after six she was there, ready to eat supper.

He was home early today. That was the problem. She'd be along shortly and—

A realization so terrible struck him that he had to sit down to avoid falling.

What if the thieves came when Irene was gone?

What if they came now?

He dashed into the kitchen, spun the safe dial, found the electronic box where he'd stashed it in the cookie jar, and opened the steel door. In went the trays of coins. He locked the safe and then went out again, not returning till he saw Irene's car was in the garage.

A narrow escape. Yes, and he learned something. From now on he would have to stick close to Irene, regardless of how unpleasant that chore was sure to be.

The coins impressed Irene, or at least the gold in them did. He told her they cost two hundred thousand to make her talk about them all the more. They had friends of hers in to see them. The society editor of the local paper mentioned the coins to a fellow journalist who did occasional articles on numismatics. He contacted Solomon. Would he mind his doing a piece on the coins? The journalist assured him it would be tasteful and guarded. Solomon suggested a few pictures.

The newspaperman came to supper, viewed the coins, made his photos, and went home to write his article. It appeared in the Sunday edition. The pictures were in color. No one in his right mind could fail to be impressed by the glitter of all that beautiful gold.

Solomon was pleased. Irene was also pleased, though she wondered aloud why her husband insisted on going along when she went here and there some evenings, as was her habit.

He responded to her comments with a stiff smile, saying, "I told you I'm a changed man."

She treated him like dirt. He endured for weeks, not wasting any opportunity to tell the world of the treasure tucked away in his

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safe, truly a veritable fortune.

They caught him in the shower, of all places, and in the morning. There he was, letting the cold water sting life into his tired flesh, singing maybe some song or another. The glass door slid back—bang!—and when he spun around to say, "Irene, what the hell?" a ski mask confronted him, and a pistol, which looked just about the right size for putting elephants out of their misery.

"Get out, quick!" the voice behind the mask said.

Solomon forgot the water was running. He forgot the tiles were cold. He forgot he was naked and dripping wet.

"Wha—what do you want?" he stammered.

From the bedroom came a scream and the sound of glass breaking, followed by a muffled curse and, "Damn it, lady, this is a gun, see? Be still or I'll shoot!"

Irene's presence had a calming effect on Solomon. He reached for a towel, raising an eyebrow as if to ask, "May I?" The gunman didn't object. He dried his face, wrapped the towel around his waist, then followed the robber's gesture to go into the bedroom.

Irene was sitting up in bed, her hair in curlers, her face caked with cream, her hands over her head, as if to ward off a blow.

"Joe, give them whatever they want!" she yelled.

"That's good thinking," the thief said.

"Like hell," said Solomon.

They all looked at him.

"Why should I hand over my coins? I sweated gallons of blood for the cash to buy them."

"Joe, you jerk!" Irene cried. "These guys mean business!"

"The lady's right, pal," said one. "Now, do you open the safe, or—"

"You beat me?" said Solomon. "Go ahead. I can take it!"

"I doubt it," the gunman said. "But beating's out of style. I mean when you've got a guy's wife, why waste time beating on him?"

"You wouldn't beat a lady!" said Irene.

"No," the gunman said. "I told you beating's out." He nodded to his partner. "OK."

The other robber cocked his pistol and aimed it at Irene.

"I'm going to count to five. You don't cooperate and the little lady gets it, understand?"

Solomon was dying to smile, but he had to bait them, so he said, "That won't change my mind. You're bluffing."

"Joe!" Irene wailed. "They're gonna kill me! Give them the coins!"

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"One—" the robber began. He watched Irene.

"Two—"

It is said that at the point of death a person's life flashes before his eyes. He wondered, was Irene recalling all those times she'd made him miserable?

"Three—"

Irene sprang at the gunman. She caught him by surprise. He stumbled backward. She clawed at his face, pulling away the mask. The man regained his balance and shot her.

The pistol report slapped Solomon like a cold towel. Irene was sprawled across the rumpled bed, her eyes fixed and staring at him.

"I'll open it—I'll open it!" Solomon exclaimed. "It's in the kitchen. Follow me!"

His towel fell off but he didn't notice. Irene was liquidated and he was free at last. So what if they got the coins. Insurance would cover that loss.

"It's behind this fake oven. Pretty clever, yeah? And just the combination won't open it. Look."

He showed them the electronic box in the cookie jar, then worked the combination and tripped the switch. He even reached in and took out the trays and set them on the counter.

Now he smiled and said, "OK, take 'em, they're all yours. I won't call the cops for twenty minutes."

The two thieves stared at him, and then he noticed both men's faces were unmasked. They didn't move.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "The coins are all I've got." He pointed at the safe. "See for yourself."

"You saw us," one robber said. "Sorry, but we'll have to shoot you."

"Me? No, wait, listen. I wanted you to kill Irene. I'll pay you. Name a price!"

"You haven't got enough. You want it here, or in there with your wife?"

Solomon lunged, but the bullet was faster. There was a shock, a sense of surprise, but no pain, except the momentary anguish he felt at knowing Irene had fouled his life again.

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Professional pride may take a fall at a most opportune time.

Haverty had been out of jail and going straight for a year when he got the irresistible offer.

He found it irresistible for two reasons. First, because it appealed strongly to his professional pride, challenged his hard-won skills. Second, because it promised to fill his flat pockets with two thousand fat dollars, a munificent sum which had not come his way, all in one piece, for some time now.

In the single year that had elapsed since his last stretch in prison, Haverty had confirmed once more that to make an honest living is far more difficult than to make a dishonest one; that prosperity inevitably eludes even the most earnest striver on the straight and narrow—especially if, like Haverty, you've spent twenty-two of your forty-five years behind bars. This hard truth was pithily expressed by a famous millionaire in the only aphorism Haverty had ever troubled to learn: No man can afford to be completely honest until he is financially independent.

It was, therefore, with a certain sense of coming home again, of

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rejoining the pleasant fraternity of thieves after a long absence in the unexciting ranks of the righteous, that Haverty approached the rendezvous suggested by the voice on the telephone that morning.

Macaloney's Tavern was tucked away between a brassy stereo center and a discount drugstore on 10th Street. At ten o'clock at night, the stereo center was dark, the drugstore getting ready to close its doors.

The back booth on the left, the voice had said. Haverty pushed into Macaloney's Tavern and gave it a quick survey before advancing. Half a dozen drinkers occupied high stools at the long bar along the right side of the narrow room. Six booths, each containing a table for four, paraded along the left wall. An amorous couple lolled in the first booth, nearest the door. The next four booths were empty. The rear booth on the left contained two men, seated side by side, facing Haverty, watching the door.

Haverty walked up the aisle between bar and booths. He didn't hurry. He didn't dawdle. He gave the impression of being a calm, untroubled man who knew where he was going and why. The most impressive thing about him, thought the two men who watched him approach, was his catlike, sinewy, utterly silent stride. There was wiry strength in the slight frame, beautiful balance of movement, effortless control of supple muscles.

Haverty paused beside their booth and gave the men at the table a level look.

The tall one, with a seamed and pitted face, said, "Mr. Haverty?"

"Yeah." Haverty sat down on the booth bench, facing them across the table.

The tall one held out a hand. "I'm Norcross," he said, with a faint clicking sound like ill-fitting dentures. "I called you this morning." Haverty had already recognized that gravel voice. "And this is Hugh Blood, the man I mentioned to you."

"Hi," Haverty said. He shook hands briefly with each in turn.

Blood was short and round and had a thin reddish beard along his jawline. His eyes were reddish-brown, too, and seemed full of good humor and amusement. His voice was pleasant—a light baritone. He presented a strong contrast to the grim-eyed, craggy character who called himself Norcross. Norcross was the one to watch, Haverty told himself. Norcross had eyes like leveled gun barrels.

Blood said, "I don't know whether Mr. Norcross explained

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my idea to you, Mr. Haverty—"

"Not in detail," Norcross interrupted. He grinned at Haverty, exposing long yellow teeth that had to be his own, Haverty decided; nobody would deliberately have dentures made as unsightly as that. "I just told him enough to get him here," he said.

"So I'm here," Haverty said. "Now what?"

"What we have in mind—" Blood began.

"Wait." Haverty took out a cigarette and lit it. "Before we get cozy about anything, I'd like to get a couple of things straight."

"Fair enough," Norcross said. "Shoot."

"First, who the hell are you?"

"Me? I told you. Norcross. Wyman H. I'm in the phone book."

"I'm not," Haverty said. "So how'd you know my number?"

"Your landlady's number's in the book." Norcross shrugged. "That's all I needed to know."

"How'd you find out I was living there?"

"Easy. Homer Haverty, ex-con. Trying to go straight. Every other ex-con in town knows that."

Haverty didn't say anything for a second. Finally, "You're telling me you're an ex-con, too? What college?"

"Raiford," Norcross said with another grin. "Raiford's the one I know best of all the colleges."

Haverty felt slight relief. "Is that how you heard about me? In Raiford?"

"As it happens, I know Conrad, your cell-mate there. He's the one who told me you're the best in your line, Haverty."

"Oh." Haverty blew smoke and relaxed against the back of his seat. "If you knew Joe Conrad . . ."

Blood, who had remained quiet during this exchange, leaned forward and said, "How about a drink, Mr. Haverty? Then we can get down to business."

"Fine with me."

"What'll you have?"

Haverty took full advantage of the opportunity. "Double Scotch rocks," he said promptly. He couldn't afford such luxuries himself these days.

Norcross called across to the bartender, "Couple more bourbon and sodas, a double Scotch on the rocks."

They sat silently at the table until the bartender lifted the flap at the end of the bar and carried their drinks over to the booth. Then Blood said, "Two thousand was the amount we had in mind, Mr. Haverty."

Haverty sipped his Scotch with relish. "I know the amount," he said. "What Mr. Norcross didn't

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tell me was what I have to do to earn it." He looked wryly at Norcross. "I guess it's got to be something crooked?"

"What else?" Norcross answered sardonically. "You don't hire a cat burglar to teach a Sunday school class, do you?"

Haverty waited.

"Let me handle it, please," Blood said to Norcross. "You got him here, and I appreciate that. From now on, though, let me handle it. All right?"

"Okay," Norcross said, "I'll shut up." He took a swallow of his bourbon and leaned back in his seat and folded big scarred hands around his liquor glass.

"Good," Blood said. "Now, Mr. Haverty, Norcross here has recommended you as the best-qualified man in the state to do this little job we have in mind."

"Thanks."

"But," Blood went on, "I understand that you've spent a great deal of time in prison. If you're as good as Norcross says you are, how come you've been in jail so often?" His tone hardened a little on the question.

Haverty tipped another installment of Scotch into his mouth and took his time swallowing it. "If your friend Mr. Norcross knows so much about me, he should know the answer to that, too. How about it, Mr. Norcross?"

"I do." Norcross gave his yellow grin. "But I didn't tell you, Hugh. It's a good question. Let him answer it himself."

"I want to hear a reasonable answer before I put out two thousand to hire a so-called expert," Blood said calmly. "You can understand that, can't you, Mr. Haverty?"

"Sure." Haverty swirled the Scotch around in his glass, thinking of the two thousand dollars. "I've never been taken in the act, Mr. Blood, if that's what's worrying you. Never been caught red-handed on a job. My record is absolutely clean that way. It's *after* the score that I seem to get a little careless." He made circles with his glass on the tabletop. "The last time I was sent up, for instance, it was a jealous broad who turned me in."

Norcross gave a bark of laughter. "*Every* time you've been inside, it's been a babe who put you there," he said. Then to Blood, "Women, Hugh. That's his weakness. Nothing to do with his professional skill at all. He's just a sucker for chippies."

Blood nodded as though satisfied. "Is that it, Mr. Haverty?"

Haverty flushed but looked him in the eye. "That's it."

"Okay. Then you're in."

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"If I like the job, remember."

"You'll like the job."

"A break-in?"

Blood nodded. "A break-in, yes. But a very tough one, Mr. Haverty. Even for you, I think, because this is supposed to be a burglarproof place."

"What kind of place? A bank?"

"No." Blood smiled. "A private home."

Haverty finished his drink. "What do you mean by burglarproof? Alarms?"

"The best. Every door, every window, the entire perimeter of the house, all hooked up to the nearest police station, two blocks away."

"Alarms I can handle," Haverty said with confidence. "How about security guards?"

"Just a quick check twice each night after 2 a.m. by a private detective outfit."

"Those guys *help* me," Haverty said, with the first smile he had allowed himself. "They make more noise than trash collectors. I've used them to cover any noise *I* was making on a job."

Norcross snorted but didn't say anything. Haverty felt a current of dislike flowing between them. He wondered how much Blood had paid Norcross to pick out a topflight cat burglar to do this little job for him.

"How about pets?" Haverty asked Blood. "Dogs, cats, monkeys, anything that might screw me up?"

"No pets. None at all, not even a canary bird."

Haverty asked the important question. "There must be something special in this house that you want, right? If you're willing to pay me two grand for a break-in?"

Blood said, "There is. Something very special."

"What?"

"A candlestick carved by Benvenuto Cellini." Blood's voice grew warm and reverent when he pronounced the name.

"Who the hell is Benvenuto Cellini?"

"A great Italian goldsmith," Blood told him. "A master craftsman of the sixteenth century."

"Oh," Haverty said, "an antique candlestick . . ." He paused. "Did you say a goldsmith?"

"Yes."

"This candlestick you want is gold?"

"Solid gold and soft enough to be utterly ruined if you're not careful with it," Blood warned. "I'll supply you with a padded velvet bag to carry it in . . ." He left the sentence hanging.

"It must be worth a bundle," Haverty said. "Well, don't worry.

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I'll be careful of it. Like my life."

Blood took a deep breath. "Then you're willing to get it for me? How about another drink to seal the bargain?" He motioned to the bartender for another round.

Haverty said, "How about a little *money* to seal the bargain, Mr. Blood?"

Blood shook his head. "*After* you deliver the candlestick, Mr. Haverty. Meaning no offense."

Haverty shrugged. The new drinks came and silence fell until the bartender was out of earshot. Then Haverty said, "How come you know all about the alarms and security checks and no pets and all that stuff, Mr. Blood? You sound as though you'd cased the house yourself."

Blood grinned. "Just as good as," he said. "I've been inside that house dozens of times because a friend of mine lives there." His eyes showed excitement. "And I've seen that beautiful Cellini candlestick often enough so that I can't bear not to own it myself!" He sampled his new drink. "I'm a collector, Mr. Haverty. I collect Renaissance art for kicks. I can afford it. And this Cellini candlestick is a masterpiece I must have. It's as simple as that."

"Why not buy the damn thing," Haverty asked bluntly, "if you got the bread?"

"Because the owner wouldn't sell it for a controlling interest in General Motors. No, we've got to steal it, Mr. Haverty. *You've* got to steal it, rather. For me. That's the only solution I can see."

Haverty contemplated briefly the possibility of raising his price in view of Blood's passionate desire for the candlestick, but he decided not to try it. Maybe the collector would have other jobs of a similar nature for him in the future. Also, it wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility, Haverty reasoned, that he could pick up a little extra loot while he was collecting the candlestick. What Blood and Norcross didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

"This guy with the candlestick, is he a collector, too?" Haverty asked.

"Yes," Blood said. "He's hooked worse than I am, if that's possible."

"Did *he* steal the candlestick in the first place?"

Norcross and Blood both laughed. "No, he paid a hell of a big price for it," Blood said. "If your conscience is bothering you, Mr. Haverty, I can tell you the candlestick is fully insured, so he won't suffer any financial loss from your break-in."

"Where's the candlestick kept?"

"In a glass display case in his

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den. Right out in the open. The glass case is shatterproof, he told me, double-locked and wired with alarms, of course. It'll be pretty tricky."

Haverty said, "Can you draw me a floor plan, Mr. Blood?"

"Sure." Blood took out an envelope, removed the letter it contained, drew a rough sketch on the back of the envelope with a ball-point pen. "It's an ordinary one-story Florida house," he explained, "only very modern in design. There's a circular center hall, see, right in the middle of everything. The livingroom, dining room, three bedrooms go off of it like this. The den is here, right across the center hall from the livingroom. Kitchen's out back somewhere, behind the dining room, probably." Blood sketched busily. "Simple layout, you see. Getting in and getting out again with the candlestick is the main thing. My friend and his wife live there alone, no servants who sleep in, no children. They sleep in this bedroom here, I think, the farthest one from the den, fortunately. With any luck at all, they shouldn't bother you a bit, Mr. Haverty. They ought to sleep right through your visit."

Haverty studied the drawing, nodded, slipped the envelope into his pocket. "What's the address? I want to case the house by daylight myself before I try to go in."

"It's 1814 Concord Drive."

Haverty didn't write it down. "I'll case it tomorrow. And go in tomorrow night if it looks possible." He smiled. "I'll take the day off from work. They'll never miss me."

"What *is* your regular job?" asked Blood curiously.

"Holding the red flag on a highway repair crew. I been trying to go straight."

Norcross laughed. "And now you're arranging to go crooked again. Well, for the money, I might be tempted myself, although it's been a hell of a while since I had anything to do with anything crooked. All I can say is, I hope you'll leave women alone after this score, Haverty. Mr. Blood won't want you blabbing about his candlestick, will you, Hugh?"

Haverty gave Norcross a long slow look and thought how pleasant it would be to throw his Scotch into that big seamed face. However, he allowed the thought of two thousand easy dollars to smother his flare of temper. He said equably, "That's one lesson I've learned the hard way, believe me."

"Nobody'll get that candlestick away from me once I've got it,"

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Blood said fiercely. "Not even if Haverty delivers a public lecture on the thing to a girl's school!"

Haverty said, "Where and when do I make delivery?"

Blood brooded a moment, then said, "Mr. Norcross and I will be waiting for you in a black Pontiac sedan when you come out of the house tomorrow night with the candlestick. *If* you come out. We'll be parked around the corner on Evergreen Way, pointing south." He raised his eyebrows at Norcross. "Okay?"

"Sounds all right to me," Norcross agreed.

"You'll see where I mean when you case the house tomorrow," Blood went on. "You meet us there with the candlestick safely inside the bag . . ." he handed Haverty a folded velvet bag that felt like suede under the table ". . . and we'll drive you anyplace you want to go."

"I'll have your candlestick there for you. Any idea what time your friends go to bed?"

"Early, I think. Unless they're at a party or entertaining."

"Good. I shouldn't be much after midnight then."

"We'll be waiting. With your two thousand."

"Right."

Haverty left when he finished his drink. He left with the feeling that he could trust Blood. Not Norcross, though. Definitely not Norcross.

Haverty was as good as his word. He took the next day off and lazed contentedly in his lumpy boardinghouse bed until ten o'clock. Then he got up, shaved, dressed, and washed down a Danish with two cups of black coffee which he brewed himself on a hot plate in his room. He switched on his cheap radio to a segment of a soap opera about a fictional thief called the Black Seal, who baffled the police of London. This program sent him into gales of contemptuous laughter. In real life the cops would have caught up with the Black Seal before the half-hour program was half over.

After breakfast he got out a map of the city. Concord Drive, he found, was clear across town from his boardinghouse, on the far North Side. A number 72 bus, which he could catch at his own corner, would drop him within four blocks of the house.

He enjoyed the bus ride across town, his thoughts pleasurably occupied with how great it would be to have substantial cash resources again after five penniless years. After tomorrow night, he could take a taxi anywhere he

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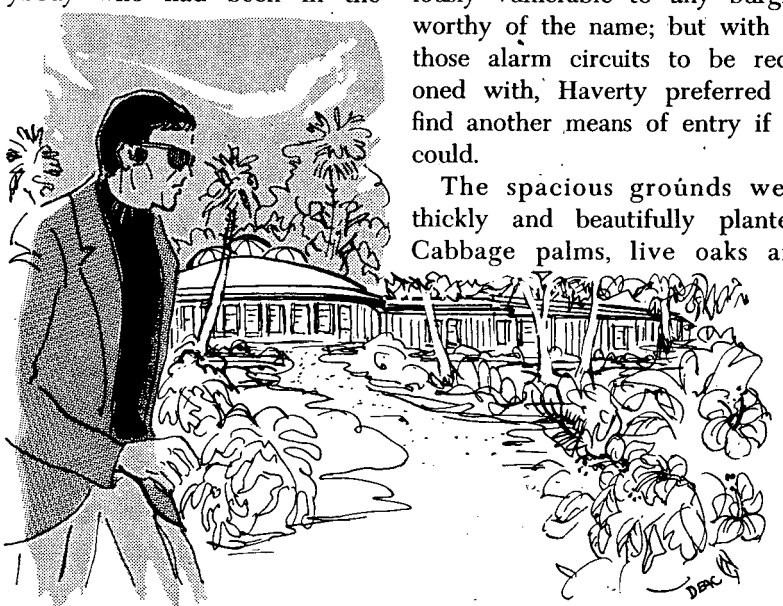
wanted to go. He could smoke two packs of cigarettes a day if he wanted to—and he wanted to. He could visit Mama Cora's on a Saturday night and buy all the girls a drink, if he chose, without having to scrimp and save all week for it.

Not for a moment did he consider the possibility that something might go wrong with the break-in that night. No. Homer Haverty was a workman who knew his own talents well, who had sharpened them to the failureproof point by constant exercise. Norcross had been right about that, anyway. Give him credit. Haverty *was* the best cat burglar in the state, bar none. Anybody who had been in the business long enough to learn his way around would admit it.

Haverty smiled. Two thousand dollars for lifting a little gold candlestick!

The house at 1814 Concord Drive was modern in design, all right, just as Blood had said. Strolling past it casually, Haverty examined it with interest. It was a large house, built of raw, pecky cypress, unstained. The series of rectangular rooms surrounding the circular center hall peered outward in every direction through huge jalousie windows. From the air, he thought, the place must look somewhat like a miniature Pentagon. Jalousies were ridiculously vulnerable to any burglar worthy of the name; but with all those alarm circuits to be reckoned with, Haverty preferred to find another means of entry if he could.

The spacious grounds were thickly and beautifully planted. Cabbage palms, live oaks and



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slash pines surrounded the house. Hibiscus, gardenia and camellia bushes grew everywhere. A red bougainvillea vine framed the front door with crimson blossoms. The natural jungle-like setting showed off the modern house to advantage, Haverty thought.

He saw floodlights at the bases of several palm trees, other floods higher up in the oaks and pines. He grinned. If the floods were a part of the alarm system, as seemed likely, the place would light up like a stage if the alarms were ever triggered. He was suddenly sure, however, that the alarms, sophisticated as they might be, would not be tripped that night. Not by him, at least. For as he rounded the corner into Evergreen Way, where Blood and Norcross had promised to be waiting for him tonight in a black Pontiac, he saw how beautifully simple his break-in would be.

He didn't bother to reconnoiter further. He had seen all he needed to see: three half-round bubbles of translucent plastic, each about a yard in diameter, set into the roof above the circular center hall. To admit sunlight by day, no doubt; to provide an interesting decorative note at night as the lights inside the house painted three luminous half-spheres against the surrounding blackness.

Haverty took the bus back to his lodging.

The afternoon passed slowly for him; he was anxious to get on with the job, now that he knew how simple it would be. At ten that evening, he dressed in the black slacks, the black sneakers, the black turtleneck he worked in, and put his small kit of burglar tools, unused for almost five years now, into one hip pocket, a pair of thin cotton gloves into the other, along with Blood's velvet bag for the candlestick. He walked down to the bus stop on the corner nearby.

He had decided to forego eating anything until the job was done. Tomorrow evening he would go to the finest restaurant in town and enjoy the first gourmet meal he'd eaten in those five years; but tonight, food seemed unattractive to him. Nerves, perhaps. It did not occur to him to fortify himself for the task ahead with a drink or two. He never touched alcohol for at least twelve hours before a job.

The bus that carried him across town was half-full of passengers, among whom he sat quietly, as inconspicuously as possible, avoiding attracting attention which might make him remembered later. He left the bus two stops earlier than he had that morning. A needless

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precaution, no doubt, but Haverty was a careful man. He avoided patterns, never repeated an action twice if he could avoid it.

After descending from the bus, he walked the streets at random, several miles from Concord Drive, without fear of losing himself. The sky was heavily overcast, threatened rain. When his watch told him it was getting close to eleven o'clock, he at length turned his steps toward Concord Drive and the Cellini candlestick.

Approaching from the opposite direction to that of his morning reconnaissance, he noted that many of the houses he passed showed lights, though a few were already dark. From a block away, he saw that the object of his attention was one of the latter. No lights showed in any of the windows. No light leaked through the domed plastic skylights in the roof. The house squatted dark and silent under the sweeping cover of its surrounding trees, a grotesque shape in the night.

Haverty felt lucky. The early bedtime of the house's occupants, and the happy chance that the architect had included those bubbles of plastic on the roof, seemed to be conspiring jointly to make Haverty's job a cinch.

Keeping in the shadows cast by the slash pines at the corner of the property nearest Evergreen Way, he checked to be sure the black Pontiac promised by Blood was actually parked around the corner. It was there. Against the glow of a distant street light, he could see the loom of two figures in the front seat of the parked car. The car lights were out.

It was now a few minutes past midnight. He returned to the house, padded silently up the driveway almost to the front door, then cut abruptly off to the left beneath the spreading branches of a live oak toward the south side of the house. With an equal absence of sound—not the rustle of a leaf nor the swish of trodden grass marked his passage—he threaded his way through the scattered flowering bushes to the window of the room which Blood's floor plan had labeled "dining room."

In the angle formed by the dining room window frame and the jutting wall of the adjacent livingroom, clung a stainless steel drainpipe, a downspout intended to carry heavy tropical rainfall from roof gutters to ground.

Haverty grinned again. He couldn't lose tonight. Anyplace else but subtropical Florida, that downspout would probably be made of ordinary galvanized steel, structurally weakened by the relentless gnawing of corrosion.

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Anyplace else, it would probably be unfit for what Haverty meant to use it: a ladder to the roof. But stainless steel! No sweat. It would bear his weight easily.

Standing at the foot of the drainpipe, he took his gloves from his hip pocket and slipped them on, working his fingers gently into the thin glove fabric, a second skin, as sensitive as his own, but incapable of leaving fingerprints.

Within fifteen seconds, he was on the roof. He had shinnied up the drainpipe as smoothly and easily as though it were, in reality, a ladder fastened to the side of the house. Drawing his breath evenly, he stood for a moment between two of the domed plastic bubbles over the center hall, and scanned the grounds around the house from this high vantage point. No sound, except the rustle of the cabbage palm fronds; no movement save the swaying of hibiscus leaves in the breeze that carried up to him the sweet fragrance of gardenia blossoms. No lights. No sign of life. No sign of danger.

His pencil flashlight, its slender beam almost fully concealed behind gloved fingers, probed momentarily at the base of the plastic bubble to his right. Then the flashlight winked off. The rest he could do in the dark, for he found, as expected, that the flat lower edge of the plastic dome was set simply in a projecting metal collar that ringed the circular opening in the roof. Six aluminum screws, spaced at intervals around this circular metal collar, held the plastic half-dome in place over the roof opening.

Haverty squatted, to keep as low a profile as possible. Working surely and silently with a screwdriver from his kit, he quickly removed the six screws. Each screw, as he removed it, was placed carefully in his pocket. Even a dropped screw made a lot of noise at night.

When the screws were all out and safely stowed, he put away his screwdriver, rose to a crouch, and lifted the plastic dome bodily out of its retaining collar and placed it gently to one side. His heart beat a little faster as he did so, although he was almost certain the alarm system protecting the house below him didn't extend to the plastic skylights in the roof. Still, you never knew. Every job was different, and Blood had warned him that this one wouldn't be easy—but no sound greeted the removal of the dome. He was home free.

He sat down gingerly on the edge of the hole in the roof he had uncovered and let his legs hang down inside. Then he

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grasped the metal collar of the opening with hooked fingers and lowered himself gently into the well of blackness below him. At the full stretch of his arms, he calculated his feet should be less than two feet from the floor of the center hall.

With an odd grimace compounded equally of tension and relief, he released his hold and dropped. A velvet cushion being tossed onto a divan would have made a louder noise than Haverty's feet landing on the rug of the hall.

He was inside, without mishap.

For two long minutes, he froze where he had landed, ears on the stretch, straining for any sound that might indicate he had alarmed the occupants of the master bedroom. He heard nothing, not even the distant rasping of a stifled snore—a sound he had grown almost accustomed to in his work.

This cautionary period of waiting ended, he took out his pencil flash once more, shielded its beam, and swept it quickly about the room in which he stood. There was a large circular center hall, as Blood had said, with many doorways opening from it, some open, some shut. The closed ones were, no doubt, the doors to bedrooms, baths, kitchen, utility room, perhaps; the open ones, livingroom, dining room and den. A wide double-door entrance was directly behind him—the livingroom. So the den should be through the archway directly opposite. He turned his flashlight beam that way and caught a glimpse of bookshelves inside. A circular Chinese rug of celestial blue, with small red birds flying about its perimeter, carpeted the round center hall from wall to wall.

Haverty breathed through his mouth shallowly. He moved a ladderback chair from its place against the hall's curving wall to a position directly under the skylight through which he had dropped. Arranging a means of escape was always the first action you took after breaking into any house.

Then, from eight feet away, he centered his flashlight beam on the arched doorway of the den itself. An electric eye, perhaps, would activate alarms if Haverty broke the beam by stepping through the doorway. Or the pressure of his step on the hall rug before the den doorway might be the trigger. He had encountered both systems many times.

He moved across the hall like a shadow, halted four feet to one side of the den archway. Lying flat on his stomach, he reached a

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long arm, took the edge of the heavy Chinese rug in his fingers and peeled it back from the den entrance for a distance of three or four feet. His flashlight showed him that no alarm mechanism lurked under the rug. He allowed the section of rug to drop back into place, rose to his feet and examined the arched doorframe of the den entrance with close attention. He saw only one tiny aperture in the doorframe from which an invisible beam could possibly extend to the opposite doorframe. This pinpoint aperture was approximately twelve inches above the threshold.

Haverty nodded to himself. Twelve inches. Probably why they don't keep a dog or cat, which would play hell with the alarm system if the electric eye was only a foot above the floor.

However, this didn't bother Haverty. He was a slender man. He lay down on his back, his head toward the open archway into the den. He kept his feet and legs down as close to the floor surface as he could. Hugging the carpet with his whole body, he began to squirm and wiggle his way into the den, using his heels to push with, his hands at his sides lifting him an inch or two above the floor to allow progress, his shoulders alternately stretching forward to lead the rest of him through the doorway. He never came within five inches of intercepting the electronic beam during the entire process.

Once safely through the doorway, he rose to his feet with an audible sigh of relief, turned slowly and focused his flashlight beam on the interior of the den itself. "Library" might have been a better name for it. All four walls of the room, except for the wide window opening, were lined with books. A shelf of books was carried across the top of the window itself, a kind of literary valance.

There was a desk in one corner, several reading lamps. A beautiful Oriental rug covered two-thirds of the floor area. The furniture was upholstered in dark red leather and looked comfortable, especially a huge armchair beside the desk. A table with several books stacked upon it stood on the other side of this large easy chair.

In the corner, formed by window and wall, was what Haverty had come to steal.

A narrow glass cylinder stood on an ivory-colored plinth of some material that looked like alabaster to Haverty. Inside this glass cylinder the delicate carved gold candlestick crafted by that Italian goldsmith whose name Haverty

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couldn't recall, sent back soft glints of golden light as his flash beam touched it. The thing didn't look worth two thousand bucks to Haverty. Yet he had to admit it was pretty enough, probably, if you liked that kind of stuff. He could see the almost transparent tracery of hair-fine alarm wires that laced the inner surface of the glass-walled cylinder. He'd have to investigate the plinth on which it rested. There had to be a switch, an electrical connection in it or under it, that controlled the alarm.

He took two steps toward the candlestick's display case. They carried him silently past the big armchair and its flanking table.

Suddenly all hell broke loose.

Every light in the large house flashed on simultaneously. Through the window of the den, Haverty saw the grounds around the house leap into instantaneous brilliance as the floodlights in the trees clicked on. Somewhere out there a powerful searchlight began to glow, revolving swiftly, throwing a blinding beam at the den window, first red, then white. A siren wailed suddenly, ear-splittingly. Bells rang shrilly, filling the house with clamor.

This sudden blaze of lights, this unexpected cacophony of sound were enough to unnerve a robot. They certainly, for a long moment, unnerved Homer Haverty. His body jerked as though absorbing an electric shock of lethal proportions. He quivered all over like a strung wire drawn too tight, and dropped his flashlight.

What had happened? What the *hell* had happened? He scrabbled mindlessly for his flashlight on the rug for several seconds before he could force his mind to work reasonably again. He remembered Blood's words: "hooked up to police station, two blocks away." At best, that gave him maybe three minutes before the fuzz arrived. More likely two, by this time.

He let his flashlight go, turned and broke for the front door. He crossed the center hall in two bounds. No time now to go out through the roof.

Reaching the front door, he cast a quick glance behind him, was astonished to see that no one had yet appeared from the master bedroom to check on the tumult of alarms. It took him three seconds to throw off the chain on the double front door, slide the barrel bolt aside, turn the handle of the door. He leaped out into the glare of the yard floodlights, leaving the front door open behind him.

Shielding his eyes with a raised hand from the merciless brilliance of the lights stabbing at them, he

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ran full tilt to his right under a live oak, seeking shadows, threaded his way through the bushes to the northwest corner of the grounds, and dived headlong through the hedge that bordered them there.

He welcomed the relative darkness of Evergreen Way as a Scandinavian impresario welcomes a brunette showgirl after interviewing countless blondes. With a lift of the heart, he saw that the black Pontiac was still there. He shot toward it, saw the headlights come on, the left back door open to receive him. He catapulted in, gasped "Go!" and collapsed thankfully on the rear seat.

Blood, at the wheel, instantly pulled away from the curb, and headed downtown at moderate speed.

Norcross' seamed face peered over the back of his seat at Haverty with a half-smile of contempt on his thick lips. "What happened?" he asked harshly. "You trip over a wire or something?"

"No," Haverty said.

"Somebody did."

"It wasn't me!" Haverty snapped at him, too winded and disappointed to be polite.

Blood said, "Let him alone. We'll talk when we get somewhere quiet."

There, thought Haverty, is a real sport. Loses out on his candlestick, yet jumps to the defense of the guy who blew the caper.

Norcross relapsed into silence. Blood drove, whistling softly between his teeth in reaction. Haverty got his breath back and struggled desperately to figure out what had gone wrong.

After fifteen minutes, to Haverty's surprise, Blood drew up and parked in front of Macaloney's Tavern, a haven of warm light and fellowship in the midst of the long row of dark stores on 10th Street. "Let's go in and have a drink," Blood said. He switched off the engine and got out.

Norcross and Haverty got out, too. "I *need* a drink," Haverty said with feeling. "If you hadn't been there, Mr. Blood, when all those alarms went off, I'd have been dead for sure. And I think another stretch in the sneezer would finish me."

They walked into the tavern, sat down in the same booth as last night. "The guy's trying to thank you, Hugh," Norcross rumbled in his gravel voice as they motioned to the bartender for service.

Haverty nodded. "I am," he said earnestly. "Thanks, Mr. Blood." He fought to make his tone conciliatory to Norcross. "And thank you, too, Mr. Norcross."

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Blood said to the bartender, "Two bourbon and sodas, one double Scotch on the rocks." The bartender went behind the bar to get them.

"I'm sorry as hell about your candlestick, Mr. Blood," Haverty said glumly. "I can't understand what happened, where I went wrong."

Norcross said, "You tripped an alarm, that's what went wrong."

"I must have. But I'm damned if I know how."

"Don't feel too bad about the candlestick," Blood said. "That's my worry. What's bugging you is losing your two thousand, isn't it?"

Haverty nodded. "It was as good as in my pocket!"

"It still can be."

Haverty looked his incredulity. "Two thousand? For blowing a break-in?"

"You didn't really blow it. Not from our point of view."

"What's that mean? I didn't get the candlestick. I triggered an alarm. I blew the caper."

"Forget the alarm," Blood said. He paused while the bartender set down their drinks and departed. "Genevieve switched it off right after you left."

"Genevieve?" Haverty stared.

"Yeah, my wife."

"Your *wife*!" Haverty was stunned. "Your wife was there?"

Blood laughed. "She was in the master bedroom all the time, waiting for the alarm to go off."

"Then that was your house?" The light was slowly beginning to dawn on Haverty. Nevertheless, his head still whirled.

Blood was enjoying himself. "I apologize for deceiving you about that," he said, "but we had to do it if our test was to be absolutely bona fide."

"What test?" Haverty felt like a parrot, repeating everything Blood said.

"We were testing our new burglar-alarm system." Blood's eyes were amused. His smile made his thin jawline beard seem even sparser. "Mr. Norcross and I are in the security business, Mr. Haverty. We've invented a new gimmick that we think may revolutionize the industry. Before we started producing and selling it, however, we wanted to give it an authentic tryout—the acid test, you might say—to see if it's as great as we think it is."

"And what's more authentic than a professional burglar, is that it?" Haverty asked.

"Exactly," Blood said. "And you were fine, Mr. Haverty. We weren't even sure you'd get inside the house."

"Getting in was no sweat."

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Haverty looked at Norcross. "What is this new gimmick of yours? I'm naturally interested. Or is it a secret?"

Norcross said, "No secret. It's patented. After you got inside, you made it through the den doorway, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Under the beam."

"And after you started for the candlestick across the den . . . that's when the alarm hit the fan, right?"

"Yeah," Haverty said defensively, "and I didn't do one damn thing that could have triggered—"

"Wait," Norcross said. "Do you remember a big leather chair near the desk? With a little chairside table next to it?"

Haverty nodded.

"And a couple of books on the table?"

"Yeah."

Norcross took a sip of bourbon. "That was the alarm," he said complacently. "The top book on that table. It's supersensitive to body heat and the slightest movement. Nothing alive can move within six feet of that book without setting off the alarm. Not even a dog, a cat, or a mouse. Pretty cute, huh?"

Haverty drew in a deep breath. "Pretty cute," he said in a low voice. "All those floodlights, bells, sirens, searchlights were activated by my body heat passing near a lousy *book*?" He couldn't keep the indignation and disgust out of his voice.

Blood laughed. "Don't take it so hard, Mr. Haverty," he said. "You've done just what we hoped you'd do—proved that our new burglar alarm is burglarproof. We're grateful to you. Here's your two thousand." He passed an envelope, fat with currency, across the table to Haverty.

Haverty was beginning to feel better. The money made him feel fine. He didn't bother to count it, merely shoved it into his hip pocket with his burglar kit. He trusted Blood—had trusted him from the beginning—but not Norcross.

He asked Blood, "How was Mrs. Blood going to explain the false alarm to the cops when they arrived at your house?"

Norcross answered him. "The cops didn't arrive tonight, Haverty. I fixed it ahead of time so they wouldn't. Told them we were just testing the system and to ignore it. See, I got a little influence with the cops, Haverty. I used to be one."

"I thought I smelled cop on you last night," Haverty said slowly. "That's how you knew about me and Joe Conrad in Raiford."

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"That's how. I sent Conrad up many years ago for his first stretch, matter of fact. I was a sergeant on Robbery Detail at the time." He swallowed half of the bourbon remaining in his glass. "Now, however, I'm vice-president of Blood Electronic Alarm Systems, Inc. A much nicer job." He showed his long yellow teeth in a grin.

Blood winked at Haverty. "Mr. Norcross is my uncle."

"Oh," Haverty said without expression. At length he smiled at Blood. "This whole thing may have been what you call authentic, all right. But it was a double cross all the same, Mr. Blood. In reverse. I'm surprised you didn't have hidden cameras taking pictures of your master burglar as your new alarm system drove him from your house."

"We did," Blood said.

Haverty looked at Norcross. "The pictures are evidence, aren't they," he said, "that can put me back in the slammer any time the mood strikes you?"

Blood said placatingly, "Here, here, *I* had the pictures taken, Mr. Haverty. *I'm* the head of the company, after all. I handle the advertising, too. Those pictures are for publicity purposes only . . .". He paused. "If you're willing, of course . . ." Another pause.

"What do I have to do? Sign a model release for the pictures?" Haverty was thinking of the two thousand dollars in his pocket.

"We want to use your pictures, your name, and a testimonial statement from you in the advertising announcement of our new alarm system," Blood said. "We are considering something like this: 'NEW ALARM SYSTEM STOPPED ME COLD,' says Homer Haverty, world's most successful cat burglar. Make *your* home or business burglarproof with Blood's Burglar Book Alarm."

Haverty grinned.

Blood went on, "However, Mr. Haverty, we'd like to go beyond a mere one-shot opening announcement. We'd like to employ you on a regular basis as a consultant to our firm. To give us the benefit of your expertise on security sytems, to help us design really foolproof equipment. That is to say," Blood added, smiling, "burglarproof equipment, not foolproof." He paused. "What do you say, Mr. Haverty?"

Haverty drained his Scotch before replying. Then he said in a curiously high, thin voice, "On a regular basis, Mr. Blood? Does that mean you'd pay me a salary?"

"Of course. Six hundred a

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month to start was what we figured."

Haverty gulped. "Do you mind if I tell you how I feel about your offer?"

"Go ahead."

"I think I've died and gone to Heaven! You're offering me a way to stay out of jail for the rest of my life, Mr. Blood. To go straight decently, clear of the stinking cops forever!"

"How about ex-cops?" Norcross asked sourly.

"Them I can get used to," Haverty said laughingly.

"You'll work for us, then?"

"You know it, Mr. Blood. And thanks a million for the chance." Haverty's spirits soared. "You want your two thousand bucks back now, Boss?"

"Keep it," Blood said. "Expense money." He shook hands with Haverty. "So how about reporting for work at the plant tomorrow morning?" He gave Haverty an address, and stood up. "Now let's go home."

When they stepped out of Macaloney's Tavern, it was raining heavily. The tropical downpour had already filled the gutters to overflowing. "Lucky the car's right here in front," Blood said. "Can we drop you, Haverty?"

Haverty shook his head. "I'll take a taxi after the shower," he said. He put his hand in his pocket and took out six screws, held them out to Blood. "But *you* better get home right now, Mr. Blood, or your Cellini candlestick will be floating into the kitchen. I left a hole in your roof big enough to flood the whole house!"

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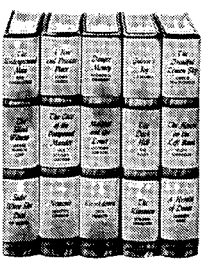

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